



Brazil star Kaka exercises during a training session in Teresópolis on Thursday.

It's Argentina v Brazil

AFP, Montevideo



With World Cup-winning coaches in both dugouts, some of the world's finest players on show and South Africa 2010 in sight, Argentina's match with Brazil on Saturday is as big as they get.

Encounters between the South American giants are always passionate affairs but the weekend's World Cup qualifier in the Argentine city of Rosario has been given further spice by Argentina's desperate need for points.

Brazil top the regional qualifying standings ahead of Chile and Paraguay and could conceivably book their place in next summer's tournament if results go their way this weekend, but Argentina are struggling.

The appointment of the legendary Diego Maradona as coach has failed to inspire an upturn in Argentine fortunes after a below-par start to the campaign and they go into the game in the fourth and final automatic qualifying berth.

By contrast his opposite number Dunga, captain when Brazil won the 1994 World Cup in America, has turned the Selecao into a well-drilled, counter-attacking unit.

Under his guidance Brazil have won the 2007 Copa America - beating Argentina 3-0 in the final - as well as winning the Confederations Cup in June, but centre-back Juan says the focus should be on the players, rather than their illustrious coaches.

"Maradona was a tremendous player, who shares a beautiful history with the Argentinian national team," said the Roma defender.

"On the same note, Dunga and Brazil have a history of their own. Neither will be on the pitch this time, however.

"We respect Maradona for everything he stands for in the world game but we've also got a great coach, which puts us on an equal footing once the game begins."

Argentina, world champions in 1978 and 1986, have not missed football's showpiece occasion since 1970, but defeat against their fierce rivals would bring that seemingly unthinkable scenario even closer.

They travel to third-placed Paraguay on

Wednesday next week, with games against Peru and traditional rivals Uruguay to follow in October.

The stakes could not be higher for the home team and they have reacted by switching the match from their usual El Monumental home in Buenos Aires to the intimidating surroundings of the 42,000-seater Estadio Gigante de Arroyito in the eastern port city of Rosario.

"I'm only thinking about winning. I refuse to countenance defeat. We're hungrier for victory than Brazil," said Maradona, who took over the reins in November 2008.

The clash between Barcelona talisman Lionel Messi and Real Madrid's 65 million-euro signing Kaka provides one of many intriguing sub-plots, but Messi's strike partner Carlos Tevez says his side will show no mercy when they confront the five-time world champions.

"I think they're going to come with a bit of fear and we're going to eat them on the pitch," said the Manchester City new boy. "But we have to respect them, because it's Brazil."

Dunga has handed a first call-up to Internacional's 20-year-old defensive midfielder Sandro in place of injured Wolfsburg captain Josue, while Maradona sprang a major surprise by recalling 35-year-old Boca Juniors striker Martin Palermo after a nine-year absence from the national side.

Elsewhere, Chile can take a big step towards their first World Cup since 1998 with victory at home to Venezuela in Santiago, while Paraguay warm up for next week's visit of the Albiceleste with a home match against Bolivia.

Ecuador, Argentina's biggest rivals for fourth place, visit Colombia, with rock-bottom Peru hosting Uruguay.

The top four teams qualify automatically for the World Cup, with the team finishing fifth facing a play-off match against the fourth-placed team in North, Central America and Caribbean qualifying.

FIXTURES

Saturday

(Kick-off times in GMT)
 Colombia v Ecuador (2030), Peru v Uruguay (2030), Paraguay v Bolivia (2230), Argentina v Brazil (0030 Sunday), Chile v Venezuela (0130 Sunday)



Argentina star Lionel Messi leaves a training session in Buenos Aires on Thursday.

C'Ron faces heartbreak

AFP, Paris



Fans have made their dissatisfaction known, but coach Raymond Domenech has called for patience.

"If they boo us at the end of the match because of the result, that doesn't shock me," he said.

Croatia, third-place finishers at the 1998 World Cup, are seven points behind runaway Group Six leaders England, who have a perfect record of seven wins in seven outings. They face Belarus before travelling to Wembley on Wednesday to take on Fabio Capello's England, who face Slovenia in a friendly on Saturday.

In Group Five, Spain also have a perfect record of six wins in six games and are six points clear of second-placed Bosnia Herzegovina with four games to go.

A win over Belgium on Saturday coupled with a Bosnia loss at bottom side Armenia would see Spain go nine clear.

Turkey, World Cup semifinalists in 2002, are third in the group, 10 points behind Spain and four off second-placed Bosnia.

World champions Italy lead Group Eight by one point from Ireland and have a game in hand.

Italy go to Georgia while Ireland are in Cyprus, who still harbour outside hopes of making the play-offs while, in Group Four, Russia look to cut the gap on leaders Germany to just one point with a win at home over Liechtenstein.

Holland are the only team in Europe who have already made sure of qualifying with a perfect 21 points from seven matches leaving Macedonia and Scotland, who are second and third respectively, 14 points behind, to battle for a potential play-off spot.

They meet in Glasgow on Saturday with the Scots still smarting from their recent 4-0 defeat in Norway.

SELECTED FIXTURES

Saturday

(Kick-offs in GMT)
 Denmark v Portugal (1800), Hungary v Sweden (1800), Spain v Belgium (2000), France v Romania (1900), Georgia v Italy (1800)

'Pressure on Argentina'

AFP, Teresópolis

Brazil star Kaka said Thursday he believes Argentina will crack under pressure when the old rivals meet Saturday in their World Cup qualifier in Rosario.

Argentina are only fourth in the regional group, five points behind the group-leading Brazilians, and only four teams go through automatically, hence Real Madrid star Kaka says the nerves will get to Lionel Messi and company as they go all out for the win they need to catch up.

They are going to start off a little tense and I think this can play in our favour. There are many ways in which we can try to exploit the fact the pressure is on Argentina," said Kaka. But he added it would be tough for both sides.

"The game won't be easy for anyone - with a Brazil v Argentina match there will be a number of top talents out there with players capable of swinging the match at any moment."

"Our target is to beat Argentina and qualify for the World Cup. It would be ideal if Brazil could go through against Argentina," said Kaka, who will be winning his 70th cap.

Kaka said he wanted to play down his duel with Barcelona's Messi.

"I would vote for him today (as world player of the year) for all that he won (last season) with Barcelona. I believe Messi is the big favourite to win the prize as FIFA's best player this year."

Gunners to appeal Eduardo ban

AFP, London

Arsenal announced on Thursday that they will mount an appeal against UEFA's decision to ban their striker Eduardo for two matches for allegedly diving to win a penalty against Celtic in a Champions League qualifier.

UEFA, European football's governing body, ruled on Tuesday that the Croatian striker had been guilty of "deceiving the referee" by tumbling as Celtic goalkeeper Artur Boruc dived at his feet during last week's second leg of the play-off tie.

Television replays appeared to indicate that Boruc had not made any contact with the forward. Eduardo converted the resulting penalty to open the scoring and Arsenal went on to win the match 3-1, advancing to the group stage of the tournament on aggregate.

The club is in receipt of UEFA's reasoned decision in relation to the charge against Eduardo, a statement said.

"We strongly believe that the decision taken is deeply flawed and not based on any forensic review of the video evidence available.

"There are obvious errors and inconsistencies in UEFA's judgment and we intend to appeal."

After all, the 65-year-old Czech Republic veteran knows his opponents well having coached them in the past and, more importantly,

Chelsea to fight ban

Cricket

AFP, London

Chelsea has vowed to vigorously contest FIFA sanctions that would prevent the London club from signing any new players until January 2011.

World football's governing body announced the ban on Thursday after its Dispute Resolution Chamber (DRC) concluded that the Premier League club had induced promising French youngster Gael Kakuta to break his contract with his first club Lens.

FIFA's DRC said Chelsea would not be allowed to register players in the next two transfer windows -- January 2010 and the period between the end of the current season and the end of August 2010.

Kakuta was banned from playing for four months and ordered to pay Lens 780,000 euros compensation. Chelsea will be liable for that amount and a further compensation payment of 130,000 euros to the French club.

But it is the transfer ban that will be of most concern at Stamford Bridge.

If upheld, it would seriously undermine Chelsea's ability to rejuvenate its ageing first-team squad over the next 16 months and the club's reaction to FIFA's shock announcement mixed outrage with incredulity.

Describing the decision as "arbitrary", a club statement vowed that, "Chelsea will mount the strongest appeal possible following the decision of FIFA's Dispute Resolution Chamber over Gael Kakuta."

It added: "The sanctions are without precedent to this level and totally disproportionate to the alleged offence and the financial penalty imposed."

An offensive, left-sided midfielder with Chelsea's reserve team, Kakuta is seen as a future star and after the 2007/2008 season was voted 'Scholar of the Year' by staff at the Chelsea Academy.

Kakuta was 15 when he signed a contract with Chelsea in June 2007.

Lens immediately complained to FIFA and, on Thursday, their President, Gervais Martel, said he had been vindicated in his belief that Chelsea had "stolen" their player.

"We expected this kind of decision. The player was under contract with us, and they came and stole him away from us," Martel told AFP.

"Chelsea didn't follow the rules. They contacted the player when he wasn't even 16 (years of age) yet, and while he had been contracted to our training group from the age of eight."

Martel added: "The financial sanction isn't over the top given the nature of the infringement, but it's really quite significant when it comes to not being able to recruit players."

Robinho asked to be left out

AFP, Manchester

Brazil forward Robinho insisted Friday that he was not dropped against Portsmouth but asked to be left out of the Premier League tie ahead of his country's international with Argentina.

Mark Hughes' decision to leave Robinho on the substitutes' bench for last Sunday's 1-0 win at Fratton Park surprised many.

However, Robinho says it was his decision to be left out so he could instead concentrate on getting fully fit for the upcoming international fixture.

On Saturday the two South American giants go head-to-head in a World Cup qualifier, with Argentina struggling to book a place for South Africa 2010.

"I asked to not play because I had pains in the ankle, especially because Brazil against Argentina is more important," he is quoted as saying in the Daily Express.

"It is always a special match because of the rivalry of the two teams. No one ever wants to lose. Every player likes to play in these matches."

Disneyland on Perez's mind

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez is considering the creation of a Disneyland-style theme park dedicated to the Spanish giants, according to press reports here on Friday.

The park, which Perez hopes will attract up to three million visitors a year, would be situated near the club's training grounds at Valdebebas, north-east of the capital, sports daily AS reported.

The cost of undertaking such a project is estimated at 150 million euros (214 million dollars) with Real having already spent 100 million euros on their new Valdebebas training centre where they plan to construct a new basketball centre.

Perez is reported to have contacted city officials in Beijing and Miami to propose local offshoots of the theme park devoted to Real Madrid, which could prove popular with the club's fans in China and the United States.

The Madrid club, whose estimated budget this year is expected to top 415 million euros, have already splashed out 250 million euros on new players. They sold their former training ground near the city centre in 2001 for nearly 500 million euros.

Fergie waits on Obertan debut

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson said Thursday that he hopes French Under 21 international Gabriel Obertan will be fit enough to make his debut by next month.

Obertan cost three million pounds from Bordeaux in the summer, but has been sidelined because of a spinal injury.

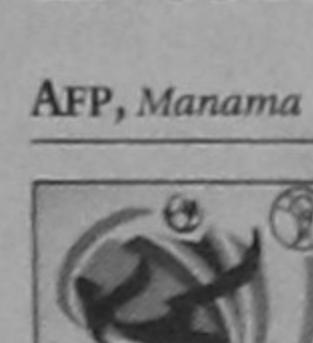
"Gabriel has had a spine problem but I think he will be back in a month to six weeks' time," Ferguson told Inside United.

"We are taking our time with him because we want him back and 100 per cent. He is very quick, can play both sides and through the middle so he brings a real versatility to us. We expect big things from him."

"At 16 he was one of the outstanding talents in Europe. But he has been playing with this back injury for a year and a half and no one thought about getting a scan."

Bahrain expect tough tie

AFP, Manama



is well aware of his own team's capacity to fall agonisingly short when it matters the most.

"The Saudis are a strong team. They are one of the best in Asia and have a number of class players," said Macala.

"We will have a tough match, no doubt about it, but I think the result of the first leg will play an important role in deciding the ultimate winner. Our aim is to win here at home and make the best of it later."

Saudi Arabia's build up to this crucial clash has not been as encouraging as their opponents. A week-long training camp in Oman ended on a bitter note with the Saudis losing a friendly match 2-1 against the hosts.

The Saudi coach Jose Peseiro of Portugal has also had to deal with a serious injury problem with key striker Naif Hazazi ruled out for more than six months following a ligament injury during a friendly against the Malaysian under-23 side.

Hazazi has been replaced by Malek Maaz who will now have to work with midfielders Mohammed Noor and Mohammed Al Shalhoub to find a way past the Bahrain defence.

Bahrain have no injury worries and the only player missing from the regular line-up is defender Abdulla Al Marzooqi who is serving a month-long ban.

But both the sides can expect good crowd support.

Macala has already urged Bahrainis, through the local media, to come and support their team while a large number of Saudis are expected to travel through the King Fahd Causeway to back their side.

I'm no cheat: Rooney

AFP, Watford



Wayne Rooney has reacted to suggestions that he dived to win a penalty in Manchester United's win over Arsenal last weekend by insisting he is an honest player.

Rooney earned and converted the spot-kick when he tumbled under goalkeeper Manuel Almunia's challenge.

Almunia had rushed from his line and appeared to catch Rooney, but television replays showed that the England star may have started to fall before there was any contact.

In the aftermath of Arsenal striker Eduardo's two-match ban for deceiving the referee to win a penalty against Celtic, Rooney felt compelled to defend himself when questioned on the issue of cheating ahead of England's friendly against Slovenia on Saturday.

"Everyone who watches me play knows I am an honest player," Rooney said here Thursday. "I play the game as honestly as I can."

"If the referee gives a penalty there is nothing you can do. It is a penalty."

"If they want to take punishment further it is down to UEFA and the people who run the game. As players you just want to play."

"Yet Rooney does not believe the problem is any worse now than it has been in the past."

"Diving has been in the game for years," he said. "Probably the coverage the game gets now, with all the cameras around, it gets highlighted a bit more. But it hasn't got any worse."

"Rather than rely on TV evidence to retrospectively punish divers, Rooney feels the referee is still the best person to deal with such issues at the time."

"It is always a special match because of the rivalry of the two teams. No one ever wants to lose. Every player likes to play in these matches."

"The decisions are down to the referee. It is a difficult job but they do the best they can."