



Brazil star Kaká exercises during a training session in Teresopolis 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 Kaká 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



Cristiano Ronaldo, the world's most expensive footballer, faces a tense World Cup survival battle this weekend as Portugal, semifinalists in 2006, desperately seek to prevent their 2010 campaign from suffering a humiliating derailment.

Ronaldo is one of a host of superstars who have seen their national teams splutter through qualifying while 1998 champions France are also about to face a testing back-to-back examination.

Portugal are third in Group One on nine points, trailing leaders Denmark by seven points and Hungary by four with four games left.

On Saturday, coach Carlos Queiroz, a former assistant to Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United, takes his team to Copenhagen to tackle the Danes and then to Budapest next Wednesday.

Only Europe's nine group winners are assured of places in the finals; the eight best runners-up have to play-off.

"We still have every chance of qualifying. None of us wants his only experience of the World Cup to be watching it on TV," Portugal striker Hugo Almeida told www.fifa.com.

"We've dropped vital points, largely because we have a lot of new and young players in the team. We're ushering in a new generation, and the process isn't complete, but I'm certain we'll pull it off."

Denmark coach Morten Olsen admits he is surprised by his team's progress which has yielded five wins and a draw.

"I think most people would have expected Portugal to be on top at this stage, especially as they've started with more home games," said Olsen, in charge for almost a decade.

France, who welcome Romania to Paris, are second in Group Seven, five points behind Serbia but with a game in hand ahead of a testing trip to Belgrade on Wednesday.

Despite boasting the likes of Thierry Henry, Karim Benzema and Nicolas Anelka, France have managed just four goals in seven matches since last November.

## Bahrain expect tough tie

AFP, Manama



Bahrain will be pinning their hopes on home advantage when they clash with bitter rivals and neighbours Saudi Arabia on Saturday in the first leg of the Asian Zone World Cup qualifying play-off clash.

The winner of this two-legged match will then clash with Oceania champions New Zealand for a place in the finals in South Africa.

The two Gulf states are familiar but fierce foes having frequently clashed at regional and continental levels.

But the Saudis have almost always got the better of their rivals, including in high stake World Cup qualifiers the most recent of which was in 2001 when they drew 1-1 at home and won 4-0 away.

But this time around the general consensus is that the two teams are on an even footing with Bahrain having made handsome gains in the last few months and Saudi Arabia suffering some serious setbacks, including failing to gain an automatic berth at the World Cup.

This is also reflected in the latest Fifa rankings where Bahrain, who are yet to play in a World Cup, are ranked 64th, one place ahead of the Saudis who are bidding for a fifth successive spot in the showpiece event.

Bahrain coach Milan Macala, however, is not getting carried away by this statistic or even his team's recent victories over Kenya and, more significantly, Asian powerhouse Iran in friendly matches following a month-long training camp in Austria.

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

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 Pezairo 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 one-match ban.

This eagerly awaited match will be played late in the evening, starting at 10pm local time (1900GMT), due to fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

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.

## 'Pressure on Argentina'

AFP, Teresopolis

Brazil star Kaká 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 Kaká 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 Kaká.

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 Kaká, who will be winning his 70th cap.

Kaká 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 5-1 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."

## Chelsea to fight ban



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.

## 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 that brought United level against the Gunners 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 difficult to prove," he said. "You see some that should not have been penalties but get given and others that are clear and do not."

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

## 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."

### IN BRIEF

## 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 wide 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."