

Maradona in spotlight

AFP, Montevideo

Argentina coach Diego Maradona will be in the spotlight as six South American countries battle for the final berths for the 2010 World Cup final starting Saturday.

With Brazil and Paraguay already assured of their tickets to South Africa next year, Maradona's Argentina and five other teams will be vying for the two remaining automatic qualifying spots with the fifth-placed team going into a play-off.

Argentina, who have been further weakened by squabbling between Maradona and general manager Carlos Bilardo, need to beat Peru on Saturday, in the penultimate qualifier.

A defeat in Buenos Aires against tailenders Peru, who are already out of the running, would not end Argentina's World Cup dream. But it would make their task extremely difficult before their visit to dangerous rivals Uruguay on Wednesday, who could also still be looking to qualify if they draw against Ecuador at the weekend.

Footballing legend Maradona acknowledged that after a disastrous qualifying campaign his job was on the line and he might quit after their must-win qualifiers.

The beleaguered football legend even sought divine intervention as he pondered Argentina's chances of reaching the World Cup finals.

"The bearded one (God) saved me many times before - and I hope he will do so this time," said Maradona.

The 1986 world champion famously dubbed his first quarterfinal goal in that year's competition the work of the "hand of God".

Argentina are five points behind third-placed Chile (27) with Ecuador on 23. Sixth-placed Uruguay (21), Venezuela (21) and Colombia (20), are also in the running for qualification.

Bolivia (12) and Peru (10), are already ruled out, but will be eager to ensure that they avoid the humiliation of finishing last in the standings.

One of the two automatic qualifying spots looks certain to go to Chile, who will qualify if they beat Colombia on Saturday.

For the other, Argentina are trailing Ecuador and are just one point ahead of Uruguay and Venezuela. Maradona's side must also be wary of Colombia who are just two points behind them.

The slightest slip up will mean Argentina fail to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since 1970.

Argentina don't need to be reminded of that nightmare after what has been a trying time for the team this week after Manchester City's Pablo Zabaleta picked up a hamstring injury on Monday.

The incident revealed a simmering row between the Argentina coach and Bilardo, who Maradona reportedly blames for not travelling to England to ensure that Zabaleta was freed earlier by his English team.

And the South American press has fired up the controversy even further by claiming that referees are being put under pressure to ensure that Argentina, World Cup champions in 1978 and 1986, qualify automatically.

"The only thing that worries me is the referee," said Peru striker Johan Fano.

But Maradona's main worry will be the configuration of his team.

The former playmaker has called up 78 players since his appointment a year ago, but is still looking for the right mix, and has given the nod to debutants Liverpool defender Emiliano Insua and Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain.

He has also recalled up Pablo Aimar to try and help Lionel Messi work some miracles for Argentine.

Uruguay, who play Ecuador on Saturday, will have every incentive to win as they can still grab fourth spot in the group and an automatic finals berth.

"We're all dreaming of going to the World Cup. We have to get through these two matches to make it happen," said coach Oscar Tabarez.

"It's difficult but not impossible."

Chile look assured of their spot in the World Cup for the first time since 1998 in France, and can qualify directly if they beat Colombia Saturday and if Ecuador or Argentina lose.

Colombia need to win against both Chile and Paraguay to be in with a chance of making the fifth-place playoff against the fourth-placed Central American zone team.

Ecuador, meanwhile, are also dreaming of qualifying for their third consecutive World Cup finals. But they must beat Uruguay on Saturday, a result which would practically assure them the playoff spot and take a point from Chile in Santiago next week.

Venezuela have a difficult task to qualify for their first World Cup. They first need to beat Paraguay and four days later topple Brazil.



Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) takes part in a training session at the Luz Stadium in Lisbon on Friday on the eve of their 2010 World Cup qualifier against Hungary.

PHOTO: AFP

FIXTURES

(all at 2200 GMT):
Saturday
 Colombia v Chile, Ecuador v Uruguay, Venezuela v Paraguay, Argentina v Peru
Sunday
 Bolivia v Brazil (2000)



PHOTO: AFP

MAN UNDER PRESSURE: Argentina coach Diego Maradona gestures during a training session in Buenos Aires on Thursday. Argentina face Peru in a crucial 2010 World Cup qualifier on Saturday.

Canna fails dope test

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro failed a dope test after taking a medicine that contained the banned substance cortisone, it was revealed on Thursday.

The former World Player of the Year was allegedly stung by a wasp and took a medicine that contained cortisone on August 29.

He requested an exemption on the grounds that it was emergency medication but his request was missing a document and while awaiting a decision he was subjected to an anti-doping test, which returned a positive result.

His club Juventus claimed he took nothing more than an anti-allergy medicine and that it was necessary to prevent a potentially fatal outcome.

"In response to the news relating to an inquest opened by the anti-doping prosecutor into Fabio Cannavaro, Juventus's medical team underlines that it acted within sanitary prescriptions and moral rules to intervene in a case of emergency following the worsening of the clinical situation as a consequence of an insect sting," said a state-

ment on Juventus's website.

"On such an occasion, vital medical therapy is given to prevent potential complications, even fatalities."

The Italian Football Federation (Fic) claimed they were immediately made aware of the situation as Juventus had sent a copy of the exemption request to their doctor just before Cannavaro joined up with the national team ahead of matches against Georgia and Bulgaria on September 5 and 9.

Cannavaro is currently on international duty once again, preparing for Italy's last two World Cup qualifiers against Ireland in Dublin on Saturday and then at home to Cyprus on Wednesday.

Cannavaro is suspended for the Ireland match but was expected to return to the team he captained to World Cup glory in 2006 for the Cyprus game.

He is due to be interviewed by the Italian Olympic Committee's (Coni) anti-doping prosecutor Ettore Torri on Friday morning in Turin.

Coni released a statement on its website explaining the circumstances of the positive test without revealing if any action has been taken against the player.

IN BRIEF

C'Ron fit for Hungary tie

AFP, Lisbon

Real Madrid striker Cristiano Ronaldo is fit to play in Portugal's crunch World Cup qualifier against Hungary on Saturday after recovering from a twisted ankle, according to coach Carlos Queiroz.

"All the players are fit with the exception of Tiago, who has not recovered," Queiroz said.

Ronaldo, who resumed normal training with teammates on Friday, added: "I'll be fit for tomorrow's match and the following one."

Benitez fumes over Dutch stars

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has revealed that he attempted to persuade the Netherlands not to take Dirk Kuyt and Ryan Babel to Australia for their friendly in Sydney.

The Liverpool boss was unhappy that two of his players were being asked to fly to the other side of the world for a friendly.

"We tried to talk with the Dutch Federation about Dirk and Ryan having to travel so far, but they have the right to call the players up for these games," Benitez said.

"We tried to find some kind of solution. But it was impossible and it is not an ideal situation for them to travel to Australia for a friendly."

Benitez's mood was hardly likely to be improved by news from Australia that Kuyt is unlikely to play in Saturday's match after sitting out training on Friday with an ankle injury he suffered in the defeat at Chelsea on Sunday.

Saudi prince mulls L'pool investment

AFP, London

Prince Faisal, a member of Saudi Arabia's royal family, is contemplating an investment in Liverpool that could go as far as a full buyout of the club, according to the head of his investment vehicle, F6.

Liverpool's American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, have confirmed they are looking for new investors and Faisal is considering buying a shareholding that "could go from anything from nought to 100 per cent," Barry Didato was quoted as saying by the BBC.

Didato stressed however that the Saudi prince has concerns over the apparently strained relationship between Hicks and Gillett, and the level of debt Liverpool has acquired since they took over the club in February 2007.

Prince Faisal -- or Prince Faisal bin Fahd bin Abdullah al-Saud -- has only held talks with Gillett to date and has established a "chemistry and shared vision," between them, Didato was quoted as saying.

Germany, Italy close in

AFP, Paris

Footballing superpowers Italy and Germany can seal their places at the 2010 World Cup on Saturday as qualifying for South Africa enters the home straight.

England, Spain and the Netherlands are the only European countries to have already secured their tickets for next year's finals leaving six automatic places still up for grabs.

A further four countries will gain qualification through the play-offs.

World Cup winners Italy travel to Dublin to play the Republic of Ireland requiring only a point to guarantee their presence in South Africa as winners of Group Eight.

Germany are in Moscow to take on Guus Hiddink's Russia where a win for Joachim Loew's side will see them safely through from Group Four.

Portugal, semifinalists in 2006, have struggled in Group One but victory over Hungary last month has given Cristiano Ronaldo and company an outside chance of making it.

The Portuguese are lying third and must take maximum points when they host the Hungarians in Lisbon to keep their slim hopes alive.

Denmark can seal top spot if they beat Sweden in a top-of-the-table clash in Copenhagen.

France are fighting for their World Cup lives in Group Seven.

Distant are the memories of Les Bleus' stirring journey to the 2006 World Cup final and their penalty shoot-out loss to the Italians as they lie second, four points adrift of table toppers Serbia.

Raymond Domenech's men improved their prospects of making it to South Africa with a gutsy 1-1 draw away to the Serbs last time out and can guarantee a play-off with victory over minnows the Faroe Islands.

Serbia however could be docked points should there be crowd trouble in their final two qualifiers against Romania and Lithuania.

The threat was made by FIFA after incidents during previous qualifying matches against France, Austria and Romania.

England's inspired run of eight wins out of eight has left Fabio Capello's side in the enviable position of being assured top spot in Group Six irrespective of their results against Ukraine and Belarus on Wednesday.

That's left Ukraine and Croatia in a fierce scrap for the table's runners-up spot.

Like England Euro 2008 champions Spain have coasted through Group Five leaving Bosnia-Herzegovina favourites to Group Eight.

FIXTURES

Saturday
 (Kick-off times in GMT):
Group One
 Denmark v Sweden (1800), Portugal v Hungary (1945)
Group Two
 Greece v Latvia (1830), Israel v Moldova (1800), Luxembourg v Switzerland (1545)
Group Three
 Czech Republic v Poland (1830), Slovakia v Slovenia (1830)
Group Four
 Finland v Wales (1400), Liechtenstein v Azerbaijan (1800), Russia v Germany (1500)
Group Five
 Armenia v Spain (1600), Belgium v Turkey (1845), Estonia v Bosnia-Herzegovina (1600)
Group Six
 Belarus v Kazakhstan (1500), Ukraine v England (1615)
Group Seven
 Austria v Lithuania (1830), France v Faroe Islands (1900), Serbia v Romania (1830)
Group Eight
 Cyprus v Bulgaria (1700), Montenegro v Georgia (1700), Rep of Ireland v Italy (1900)

Carlo praises English

Football

AFP, Rome

Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti hit out at his countryman in an interview in La Gazzetta dello Sport on Friday, claiming they are not as sporting as the English.

Ancelotti began his first job outside of his homeland this season when he took over the reigns at the west London club following eight years with AC Milan and previous spells at Juventus, Parma and Reggiana.

And already he has noticed several differences between the football culture in his adopted home and his motherland.

"The first thing is the stadiums. Here in England they're attractive, comfortable, suited to the show," he said.

"In Italy, they're not. And then there's the fans who here go to a game to be entertained and not to get angry with the referee or the opponents."

"It's more sporting, it's a different culture. Here there's more of a sporting culture."

He admitted the toughest thing so far about his switch is adapting to a new language.

"It's improving. It's difficult but I'm trying hard. I can't tell you how many times people have asked me 'why didn't you study English at school?'"

"At 50 it's never easy to start learning a new language."

"(Ray) Wilkins helps me out, although by now everyone understands me. If I get angry I shout in Italian but that's basic phrases that everyone understands."

Since Ancelotti left Milan his former charges have struggled, winning only two of their first seven league matches and losing at home to FC Zurich in the Champions League.

But Ancelotti insists his successor Leonardo just needs a bit of time to get things right.

"Let's not turn this into a drama. They're going through a difficult period due to the sale of Kaka but they have what it takes to turn things around, this is just a settling down period," he said.

"Leonardo has a difficult task but around him there's a great structure and the club has faith in him and you'll soon see that he'll manage to get his ideas across."

Ancelotti also revealed that he's been keeping in touch with the antics of Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho via Italian satellite TV as the Portuguese boss continues to create polemics seemingly every other week due to a fractious relationship with the Italian press.

Becks set for Milan return

Football

AFP, London

LA Galaxy are close to agreeing a loan deal for England midfielder David Beckham to return to AC Milan in the January transfer window.

Tim Leiweke, the chief executive of AEG, which owns Galaxy, said they were aware that a move would help Beckham improve his chances of featuring in next summer's World Cup.

Leiweke said that the 34-year-old needs a year of solid football to boost his bid to reach the World Cup.

"We have a deep appreciation of what he is doing over here with his national team," Leiweke said at the Leaders in Football summit at Stamford Bridge on Thursday.

"I wanted him to know that we will support him so we are going to lend him out."

Galaxy want Beckham's loan deal sorted out soon so he can concentrate on a title challenge with his club.

"We want to get it done, for him and for us, because we have work to do over the next few weeks and I don't want any confusion," Leiweke said.

"It's the same with Landon (Donovan), there are a lot of rumours of whether he is staying or going. We're going to

clear that up in the next two weeks because we want the team to be focused."

Leiweke is also hoping Beckham can attract other big names to the club.

"If we don't have a player like David going around telling every other great player that we're co-operative and it's a great place to play and you really should go and do this", if we don't have him as our ambassador, then we're never going to get other players to take that kind of risk," he said.

"That is the battle for us. We can't do this with one guy."

Although Leiweke is happy to loan Beckham to a European club prior to the World Cup, he is confident the former Manchester United and Real Madrid star will see out his contract with the Galaxy.

Beckham signed a five-year deal when he joined the Californian club in 2007.

Leiweke said: "We know he has to be playing in Europe leading up to the World Cup. That has been made clear to us, and we are going to support that."

"He will be somewhere come January and we will see him back in July."

"We have a contract and despite people thinking we're going to sell him, we're not. David is going to finish his career with the Galaxy."

Germany meanwhile are intent on wrapping up their qualification campaign with a game in hand.

Midfielder Thomas Hitzlsperger said: "Our goal is to decide the World Cup qualification places for ourselves on Saturday."

"We are all united on that: We travel to Moscow in order to win."

"We know Russia has an extremely strong team and we respect them."

"But we have already beaten the Russians and to go there standing tall as table leaders. We have every reason to be self-confident."