

# Maradona's last chance

AFP, Buenos Aires



South America's gauchos are renowned for toughing things out in harsh conditions - but few would see much wisdom in changing their horses in mid-stream.

Two-time world champions Argentina did just that last November in appointing Diego Maradona - national hero as a player, but a coaching novice - as the man to lead them towards next summer's World Cup finals in South Africa.

By Wednesday night, the albiceleste and their fans will know whether the decision to bring in el pibe de oro (the golden boy) to replace Alfio Basile was inspired or crass.

Basile made a mediocre start to the qualifiers but, under Maradona, things have gone from bad to worse and failure to beat Uruguay in Montevideo will leave his team having to limp through the playoffs against an oppo-

nent from Central America.

Should Argentina lose on the 'unlucky' 13th of the month they may not even make the playoff - if Ecuador, two points behind them, win in Chile.

That a team boasting the talent of Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez, to name but two, should be having to walk the razor's edge as they tiptoe towards South Africa says much for the current state of morale in the squad.

Argentina just edged minnows Peru at home last Saturday after Martin Palermo, a veteran who once missed three penalties in one international, managed to find the net in stoppage time.

Now Messi and company have to show that six defeats in 17 games were mere accidents rather than symbolic of a team which does not have a strategy.

Basile resigned with Argentina third in the group after 10 matches, seven points adrift of then leaders Paraguay.

But Maradona has struggled to make an impression

since then, with the low point coming in a 6-1 hiding, albeit at altitude, in Bolivia.

Brazil, Paraguay, and Chile have already booked their passage but the Uruguayans, world champions in 1930 and 1950, are just a single point behind Maradona's men and a home success will give them the fourth and final automatic berth.

Midfield veteran Juan Sebastian Veron returns from suspension but Palermo will start on the bench as Gonzalo Higuain and Messi spearhead matters.

Palermo insists Argentina will roll their sleeves up and fight.

"It's going to be another final and we have to go over there and play for our lives," he told FIFA.com.

## FIXTURES

(all times GMT)  
Uruguay v Argentina (2300), Brazil v Venezuela (2100), Peru v Bolivia (2000), Chile v Ecuador (2300), Paraguay v Colombia (0000)

But a ghost from Argentina's past, 1978 champion and top goalscorer Mario Kempes, suggests much of the blame has to be laid at Maradona's door.

"There appears to be a problem of communication. On the field it's clear the players don't understand what he is asking of them," Kempes said in an interview with German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Uruguay coach Oscar Tabarez says that qualifying "is in our own hands," as the Charruas rely on the likes of Diego Forlan, penalty hero in Quito at the weekend, to fire them into that fourth spot.

Brazil, despite their Bolivian hiccup to end 19 matches without loss, face Venezuela at home in their final qualifier with all the pressure off.

Chile can likewise relax against Ecuador, as can Paraguay against Colombia as they try out new permutations with their Cup tickets booked.

Bolivia are away at bottom team Peru in the other game.



Brazil star Kaka (L) and teammate Elano jog during a training session at the Pedro Pedrossian Stadium on Monday. Brazil play Venezuela in a 2010 World Cup qualifier on Wednesday.

## Diawara sorry for tackle on C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Marseille defender Souleymane Diawara has apologised for a tackle that has left Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo facing up to a month out.

"I am sorry. I am sad and it's been tormenting me these last few days. I didn't intend to injure him," the Senegalese centre-back told the sports daily AS.

He said he hoped "from the bottom of my heart that he recovers as quickly as possible."

"I was so pleased to be marking Kaka or Cristiano Ronaldo. It was a dream come true now with the defeat and everything that happened with Cristiano, it has become something dismal."

Real beat Marseille 3-1 at the end of September and Ronaldo has been injured ever since.

The 94-million dollar striker tried to play in Portugal's World Cup victory over Hungary last Saturday but lasted only 27 minutes before the ankle gave way.

According to the Spanish press, Real Madrid are less than amused to see their leading goalscorer on the sidelines with Champions league action looming.

Real reportedly banned Ronaldo from going to watch Wednesday's final World Cup qualifier for Portugal against Malta.

"The important thing is recuperating perfectly to get over the problem," the player himself said on Real's website - though he did earlier ask for permission to make the trip.

He suffered the original problem in the Champions League win over Marseille at the end of September.

## Kalou agrees new deal

AFP, London

Salomon Kalou has become the latest Chelsea star to agree a new long-term deal, with the Ivory Coast striker signing a contract that will keep him at Stamford Bridge until 2012.

Kalou is in his fourth year at Stamford Bridge and has made 93 starts, 66 substitute appearances and scored 31 goals for the club.

Blues boss Carlo Ancelotti predicted a bright future for the striker, who has followed Didier Drogba, John Terry, Ashley Cole, John Mikel Obi, Florent Malouda, Hilarjo and Michael Mancienne in extending his stay in west London.

"I am very pleased that Salomon has signed a new contract with us as he is an important player for this club," said Ancelotti.

"He is always well motivated and works hard at his game at all times. Because of this I am sure that Salomon will become an even more important player for Chelsea in the future."

According to English media reports, Kalou's new deal gives him a salary of 60,000 pounds a week.

## Lippi launches WC plans

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Marcello Lippi has wasted no time in launching preparations for next year's World Cup, insisting that anyone can force their way into his plans.

Italy host Cyprus in Parma on Wednesday in a now meaningless group eight qualification tie after the world champions secured their passage to South Africa with a last gasp 2-2 draw in Dublin on Saturday.

They head the group by four points from Ireland with just one match to play.

And Lippi is already starting to talk about what he might do in June, with AS Roma striker Francesco Totti one name he is constantly asked about.

Totti retired from the international scene after helping Italy to World Cup glory in Germany three years ago but has recently indicated that he would be open to a return to the national team.

"Totti is a great person and a great player," said Lippi before joking that he would pick anyone the press wanted him to.

"I'm not ruling out anything, I need to make a technical assessment on the group I have available to me at the moment."

"And I have to see if some of those who aren't here, even those who have never been called up, have the technical characteristics necessary for my team."

One of those names currently in the squad but whose presence is far from a sure thing is Villarreal forward Giuseppe Rossi.

"It will be an important test for many of us, the aim is to win and to impress," he said.

## Must win for C. Rica

AFP, Washington



No Costa Rican team has won a World Cup qualifier on US soil in 24 years but the Ticos must end that drought Wednesday to ensure themselves a berth in the 2010 South Africa World Cup.

North American regional qualifying for next year's global football showdown ends Wednesday with the Americans and Mexico having already secured berths and Costa Rica fighting Honduras for the region's last automatic World Cup spot.

The US squad sets the pace with 19 points off six wins and a draw in nine matches, although one of their losses came 3-1 at Costa Rica in June. Mexico, which visits eliminated Trinidad and Tobago on Wednesday, is next on 18.

The Ticos are next at 5-4 for 15 points with Honduras at 4-4 with a draw for 13 points. Honduras will travel to "Soccer War" border rival El Salvador on Wednesday needing a victory to have any hope of taking the automatic berth.

Costa Rica would clinch a trip to South Africa with a victory but a draw or loss opens the door for Honduras, which would have a superior goal difference and get the nod with a victory combined with a Ticos draw at Washington.

Neither team will see their World Cup dream

die but CONCACAF's fourth-place team faces a two-leg playoff against the fifth-place side from South America to determine a World Cup berth.

"It's very important for us to qualify for the World Cup by taking care of our business without having to worry about other results," 35-year-old Ticos defender Luis Marin said.

Ticos coach Rene Simoes, a Brazilian who formerly guided Jamaica, took over after Rodrigo Kenton was fired after three losses in a row. Costa Rica won 4-0 Saturday at Trinidad and Tobago but Simoes knows his next foe is formidable.

"The US team knows how to control a match very intelligently," Simoes said.

Credit US coach Bob Bradley with providing the US squad with the instinct and discipline to seize command.

"It has been a long learning process and we really came together, stayed disciplined, played very mature," US star Landon Donovan said. "And different guys have stepped up each time. Those are all things he instilled in us."

The Americans, likely without injured Clint Dempsey, face a Costa Rican side featuring striker Alvaro Saborio and Esteban Sirias as well as several veteran players Simoes brought back to the national side to salvage the qualifying bid.

A US victory is likely necessary for the Americans to top the group with Mexico visiting an ousted Trinidad and Tobago side that has won only once in qualifying.



Brazil and Milan forward Ronaldinho (R) receives the Golden Foot award from Prince Albert II of Monaco on Monday. The Golden Foot award is an international career award given to players who stand out for their athletic achievements.

## Ronnie stays confident

AFP, Rome



Crisis-hit AC Milan head into a perilous pair of matches in the coming week that could make or break their season, but Brazilian forward Ronaldinho believes that could inspire his team.

Milan have endured a dreadful start to the season, finding goals hard to come by and scoring just six times in nine matches.

They have won only two of their first seven Serie A encounters and in the Champions League they lost 1-0 at home to Swiss minnows FC Zurich.

It is not the type of form to inspire confidence ahead of their clash against Roma at the San Siro on Sunday and then a trip to Spain to tackle Real Madrid and former star Kaka at the Bernabeu.

But having coming up short against the likes of Udinese, Livorno, Atalanta and Bari this season, Ronaldinho insists the next two fixtures are exactly the kind of games Milan need to kick-start their season.

"I would like to beat Kaka and Real Madrid in the Champions League, that would give us a big boost to get back on track," Ronaldinho told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"And first of all the game against Roma could change our season. But one match isn't

enough. We need to string a run of results together, Milan should be fighting for titles."

The desire to win silverware was one reason Ronaldinho cited when he joined the club at the beginning of last season but after a good start to his Milan career, 2009 has had more downs than ups.

He lost his place in the team after injuring himself half-way through last season and with little sign of his Barcelona form of old this term, he has once again found himself often warming the bench.

"I think positively," he said. "If I have to start on the bench I'll be ready to contribute but I'm only happy when I'm playing."

"I'll try to convince (Milan coach) Leonardo that I'm the real Ronaldinho and that I deserve to be picked."

The 29-year-old is also aware that if he fails to hold down a regular starting place, that could jeopardise his chances of going to the World Cup in South Africa with his country next year.

"I hope to help the Selecao to win the title," he added. "I speak often with (Brazil coach) Dunga, we have a great relationship."

"The coach isn't calling me up at the moment and I understand why. If I'm not playing for Milan, how can I play for the Selecao?"

But "I'm not giving up, there's still time to convince everyone."

## IN BRIEF

### Peruvian fan hacks Diego website

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina coach Diego Maradona, already reeling after a shaky World Cup qualifying campaign which could yet end in failure, suffered more irritation Monday when a Peruvian fan hacked into his website.

The fan derided Maradona as "the biggest cry baby of all time" underneath a picture of the former star caught during a tearful moment in his playing days.

"For the biggest cry baby of all time. We didn't win at the football - but we did on the web," said the hacker, dubbing himself "Elite-Peruvian".

He put the message up after Argentina beat Peru 2-1 in Buenos Aires at the weekend.

Argentina, who won the game with a last-minute goal, still have to win away to Uruguay on Wednesday to ensure a direct berth in next summer's finals.

They have not missed a World Cup since 1970.

### Gerrard out of final qualifier

AFP, London

Steven Gerrard has been ruled out of England's final World Cup qualifier, against Belarus on Wednesday, with a groin injury.

The Liverpool captain suffered the injury during Saturday's 1-0 defeat in Ukraine and was unable to complete a training session with the rest of the squad on the eve of the match.

England boss Fabio Capello said: "He didn't finish training because the pain was the same as yesterday. He's going back to Liverpool."

Portsmouth goalkeeper David James is also a doubt for the Wembley match after missing training with a knee problem. Capello said he would decide on whether James could play on Wednesday.

West Ham's Robert Green started in goal in the Ukraine but is suspended after being sent off in what was England's first competitive defeat under Capello.

England had already booked their place in the World Cup finals prior to Saturday after winning their first eight matches in group six.

## Menotti defends Messi

### Football

INTERNET, undated

Menotti has hit out at Lionel Messi's critics, stating that the Barcelona star is able to play for his club but has to run and run for his national team.

The veteran trainer, who led the Albiceleste to World Cup glory in 1978, thinks that blaming the diminutive Blaugrana forward is unacceptable because of his differing roles with club and country.

Despite helping Argentina to a crucial win at the weekend, Messi was again highlighted as under-performing, and that has drawn Menotti's ire.

"Argentina do not yet have a functioning team. They have not had the time to find that unity and team play," he told Sport.

"That is completely different from the way that Messi does things with Barcelona. He started at the club, then was on the bench and then began to play for a few minutes before

claiming a regular place.

"Messi is not responsible for the strategy at Barcelona. That is [Andres] Iniesta, Xavi and [Yaya] Toure.

"Messi is the one that completes the moves.

"When it comes to Argentina they expect Messi to cope with the strategy of the team, to create goals and score them, to do everything.

"The team runs around a lot because they play badly. There they need to run more. But this is a football team, not a marathon club.

"Messi plays for Barcelona, but [with] Argentina he runs."

Menotti then explained why he feels that Diego Maradona has been unable to create a team out of so many stars.

"The team has not yet reached the level that was expected. The Argentina side have not had a coach for a long time," he continued.

"Not because they do not know how to, but because they are not able to because there is not enough time as all the players are in Europe.

"You cannot direct a great orchestra if the musicians are in Roma and the conductor is in Buenos Aires."

## It's crunch time

AFP, Paris



Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo could endure an agonising night this Wednesday when he watches from afar as Portugal launch a final bid to qualify for the 2010 World Cup.

Ronaldo aggravated a right ankle injury in Portugal's defeat of Hungary on Saturday, a result which has put Carlos Queiroz's side into second place on 16 points in Group 1 at the expense of Sweden, who have 15.

With Denmark already automatically qualified after their 1-0 defeat of Sweden on Saturday, Portugal know they cannot afford to settle for a draw at home against Malta, especially if Sweden beat Albania in Solna.

Group 2 is one of two from the nine in the Europe zone that, ahead of the final qualifiers, still has no automatically qualified team -- the other is Group 3 where Slovakia and Slovenia are both vying for top spot.

Switzerland, who lead Group 2 on 20 points from nine games, have been speculating on the various possible outcomes if they fail to claim at least a draw against Israel and Greece defeat Luxembourg.

Although the memory is 16 years old, some Swiss remember only too well when Israel stunned France 3-2 in a World Cup qualifier at the Parc des Princes in October 1993, a result which contributed to their absence from the 1994 tournament in the United States.

Switzerland host Israel in Basel knowing that even if Greece, who have 17 points, beat Luxembourg a draw should be enough to see them through as the group winners.

But Swiss federation official Martin Trumpler, who has spent hours studying their rivals, has warned Ottmar Hitzfeld's men to underestimate the Israelis at their cost.

"I've watched the last three games Israel played, against Latvia (0-1), Luxembourg (7-0) and Moldova (3-1). They are really impressive when it comes to moving the ball around low," said Trumpler.

Switzerland's sixth win in the group from nine matches came last Saturday when they beat Luxembourg 3-0.

But Hitzfeld warned: "We're still not qualified. We have a very difficult fixture ahead of us, and we have to remember the Israelis are far stronger than Luxembourg."

"I want my players to be 100 per cent focused on the job. The thing we have to exploit is the Israelis' tendency to open their game up, thus creating more space."

Slovakia spurned the chance to secure automatic entry to the finals in South Africa next summer when they suffered a 2-0 shock defeat to Slovenia in Bratislava on Saturday.

It means the Slovaks, on 19 points with a two-point cushion on Slovenia, cannot afford to lose on their travels to Poland on Wednesday. Slovenia play away to group whipping boys San Marino.

Sitting in third place on 15 points, the Czechs are virtually out of contention for a runner-up spot that could see them qualify through a two-leg play-off.

Ivan Hasek's men would have to beat Northern Ireland on Wednesday and then depend on the unlikely scenario of San Marino beating Slovenia, to move back up to second place.

Elsewhere, Croatia, who sit third in Group 6 seven points behind leaders England but only one behind Ukraine, travel to Kazakhstan for their final qualifier.

A win there, coupled with a unlikely victory over Andorra over Ukraine, would see Croatia jump up to second place among the play-off places.

## Jovanovic in Valencia talks

AFP, Belgrade

Wanted Standard Liege midfielder Milan Jovanovic, who scored twice for Serbia at the weekend, is in talks with Spanish top flight club Valencia.

"Valencia has offered a three and a half year contract worth 4.5 million euros," the Serb's agent Zoran Stojadinovic said.

Negotiations were to resume at the end of the week following Serbia's 5-0 victory over Romania in World Cup qualifying, the agent told the Sportski Zurnal newspaper.

The daily said Spain's Atletico Madrid had also shown interest in Jovanovic but that the player preferred to join fellow Serb Nikola Zigic at Valencia.

Jovanovic has announced he wants to play at a higher standard than the Belgian championship.