

Mind games begin

AFP, Cape Town



The scene is set for World Cup 2010 and already the mind games have begun.

Group of Death or not

Group of Death, no easy draws, one match at a time -- the 32 national team coaches were the most sought-after personalities in Cape Town after Friday night's draw here.

England's Fabio Capello is a keen student of football past and present and, even though born in Italy, he is aware that one of the biggest upsets in World Cup history took place in 1950 when a ragtag team of Americans defeated mighty England 1-0.

He will be determined to avoid any hints of complacency this time around with England drawn against the United States, Algeria and Slovenia which even the most wary of observers would grant is a tasty offering for any top-class side.

"The USA are strong physically and technically they are good enough. I saw the game against Spain when they won and it will be no easy game," he said.

Similar sentiments from Marcello Lippi, coach of defending champions Italy, who also knows something of World Cup catastrophe dating back to 1966 when they amazingly lost 1-0 to North Korea to crash out of the competition.

This time the danger comes in the not-too-frightening forms of Paraguay, Slovenia and minnows New Zealand.

"The more you think a group will be easy the more difficult it becomes," Lippi said truthfully.

"Paraguay were top of the South American qualifying group for a long time before being overtaken by Brazil at the end.

"Slovakia are improving, they have players we know well, also some who play in Italy and

they beat some good teams to get here."

Nothing about New Zealand then, who won through by defeating the likes of Fiji and Vanuatu to take the Oceania crown before edging Bahrain in a play-off.

For others though the boot was on the other foot, with the underdogs talking up their chances of mixing it with the big boys.

Take hosts South Africa, the lowest ranking team qualified for the June 11-July 11 finals, and eager to avoid the ignominy of being the first home nation to fail to make it out of the group stages.

Their Brazilian coach, Carlos Alberto Parreira, who has tasted the ultimate in World Cup glory by leading Brazil to the crown in 1994, must make it past Portugal, Ivory Coast and North Korea to reach the hallowed land of the last 16.

"The greatest challenge is getting to the second phase. South Africa must work hard but I'm confident we will get there," he said.

"I hope that with the backing of home fans we will reach the quarterfinals and after that the sky is the limit."

For some though what the draw threw up hardly mattered at least not that they would let on.

France's notoriously taciturn coach Raymond Domenech for one raised a bushy eyebrow when asked if he agreed that his side would be favourite to make it out of the South Africa group.

"It just isn't as simple as that. Everyone will have us down as favourites, but I don't know what they base that on. We will see how that stands when it is all over."

"The groups are well balanced and there is no real Group of Death this time. You can never be sure. We have seen so many surprises in the past."

The mind games have begun then and it is unlikely they will stop until South Africa kick the show off against Mexico in Johannesburg on June 11.

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PHOTO: AFP

(L to R) England star David Beckham, South African actress Charlize Theron and FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke take part in the 2010 World Cup draw ceremony at the Cape Town International Convention Centre on Friday.

IN BRIEF

World Cup prize money

AFP, Cape Town

Prize money for 2010 World Cup from June 11 to July 11 in South Africa:

Champions: 30 million dollars
Runners-up: 24 million
Semifinalists: 20 million
Quarterfinalists: 18 million
Second round: nine million

First round: eight million

Note: Each qualifier receives one million to assist preparations

Spain to choose WC base

AFP, Madrid

World Cup favourites Spain are due to choose Rustenburg, the mining city situated at altitude north east of Johannesburg, for their World Cup base, according to reports here Saturday.

The European champions, FIFA's top-ranked team, were pitted against fellow Hispanic nations Honduras and Chile in Group H, along with Switzerland, in the draw made in Cape Town on Friday.

Media reaction here to the draw was favourable, but the possibility of facing Brazil, Portugal or Ivory Coast, in the next round was described as "diabolical" by Sports daily Marca.

Spain's first match will be at Durban against the Swiss, followed by the Hondurans in Johannesburg and Chile in nearby Pretoria.

'Hosts not afraid'

AFP, Johannesburg



South Africa coach Carlos Alberto Parreira said the host nation was not afraid of any of the teams it drew in Group A of the 2010 World Cup.

"We are going to play the ball on the ground," Parreira said after the draw in Cape Town Friday.

"We are going to prepare ourselves, we are not afraid. Mexico are a good side, France have got players in the Champions League and they are good side."

Hosts South Africa, who will play Mexico on June 11 in the tournament opener were also drawn against two-time champions Uruguay.

Parreira, who guided his native Brazil to the 1994 World Cup title, said his mission was to guide South Africa to the last 16.

South Africa are set to stage training camps in Brazil and Germany as part of their preparations for the finals.

If South Africa fail to make it past the first round, it will become the first host nation not to reach the second round since the World Cup was first staged 79 years ago.

Parreira said the draw indicated that there was no easy group.

"It is the only World Cup we

cannot say who is the Group of Death. There is no easy group. It is the best balanced World Cup in history. We are the only group that has two former world champions in France and Uruguay.

Parreira, who rejoined Bafana in November when his countryman Joel Santana quit after a disappointing 17-month reign,

"We have to look at the group as a whole and not focus on the first game."

"The bottom line is that we face three difficult games and face them in a positive way."

Mathew Booth, a towering defender with Bafana Bafana, never expected to be drawn against an easy side.

"It's a tough group, we never expected it to be easy."



PHOTO: AFP

A handout image from Adidas shows the 2010 World Cup official match ball called Jabulani which was unveiled in Cape Town on Friday.

added: "This is the hand we have been dealt and what we will have to face."

"We have to prepare ourselves in a possible way to make sure we go past the first round."

"I do not look at the first game. If we get a good result against Mexico and lose against Uruguay and France it will not matter."

But I don't envy the Mexicans playing in front of 90,000 vuvuzelas (trumpets)."

Former South Africa captain Neil Tovey said they had been drawn in a tough group, but believed France were beatable.

"It's a very, very tough group, but as the host nation we have to qualify for the next round," Tovey told AFP.

BUNDESLIGA Bayern go third

AFP, Berlin

Germany striker Mario Gomez hit his third goal in his third consecutive Bundesliga game on Friday night to help Bayern Munich seal a 2-1 win over Borussia Moenchengladbach to go third in the table.

The 24-year-old added to his strikes against Hanover and Leverkusen with a fine first-half strike before 20-year-old defender Holger Badstuber hit the winning goal after Borussia had equalised.

Bayern must win at Turin's Olympic Stadium against Juventus next Tuesday to book a place in the Champions League knockout stages and this win was a much-needed confidence booster.

The result now leaves Louis van Gaal's Bayern third in the table and just three points behind league leaders Leverkusen and level with second-placed Werder Bremen on 27 points.

Leverkusen are at Hanover on Saturday, while Werder Bremen are at Cologne on Sunday.

Bayern have dramatically improved their league position with their second consecutive win and Gomez gave them the perfect start when he slotted home on 19 minutes having given Gladbach goalkeeper Logan Bailly no chance.

The visitors' Dutch defender Roel Brouwers equalised in the 28th minute, but Bayern's rising star Badstuber made sure of the three points with a 75th-minute direct free-kick.

Drogba's worst nightmare

AFP, Cape Town



Didier Drogba had a wish not to face England in the first round of the 2010 World Cup granted here on Friday, but that is where his happiness ended.

Ivory Coast, considered the African nation capable of going furthest, drew Brazil, North Korea and Portugal in Group G, and the Chelsea striker must be wondering what his country have done to offend the football gods.

When the west African 'Elephants' qualified for their first World Cup in Germany three years ago, they got Argentina, Netherlands and Serbia and a raw team at the highest level made an inevitable first-round departure.

Now a similar fate awaits the Ivorians with Brazil and Portugal favoured to advance and the Africans possibly left with a third-place finish ahead of the mysterious men from the East, North Korea.

Drogba talked pre-draw of Ivory Coast reaching the semifinals, but as he watched the draw in England, a last-four place must have been the last thing on his mind.

It is not that the 'Elephants' are lacking in stars with Drogba, fellow Chelsea striker Salomon Kalou, Barcelona midfielder Yaya Toure and his older brother and Manchester City defender Kolo on their roster.

But Brazil have won the World Cup a record six times and are already being branded favourites for the title alongside in-form European countries England and Spain.

Goalkeeper Julio Cesar, full-back Maicon, playmaker Kaka and striker Luis Fabiano are just some of the gems in a crown nurtured by coach Dunga, a former World Cup winner himself.

And years of heavy investment in youth is paying dividends for Portugal, who were runners-up in Euro 2004 and fourth behind Italy, France and Germany at the last World Cup.

Cristiano Ronaldo will drive a Portuguese armada determined to prove they are much better than a European campaign that needed home and away play-off victories over Bosnia-Herzegovina to secure qualification.

A South African journalist dismissed North Korea as a "students team" after a recent loss to local league leaders SuperSport United during a tour of the region that also featured a 4-1 drubbing at the hands of Zambia.

But dare anyone dismiss the 'Red Mosquitos' given a World Cup record that includes a stunning 1966 victory over Italy and a gallant 5-3 quarterfinal loss to Portugal after leading by three goals?

Calendar

