

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Gabon bite Cameroon

Football

AFP, Luanda

Gabon became the latest underdogs at the Africa Cup of Nations to punch above their weight when they claimed the scalp of continental giants Cameroon with a 1-0 win on Wednesday.

Later, in Lubango, 2004 champions Tunisia were unable to capitalise on Cameroon's slip up when they escaped with a 1-1 draw against Zambia to leave Group D wide open.

Angola 2010 is fast earning a reputation as a tournament of upsets, with Angola squandering a 4-0 lead to draw 4-4 draw against Mali, Algeria whipped 3-0 by Malawi, and Ivory Coast held by Burkina Faso.

Egypt, the two-time champions, are the only side to do themselves justice in the opening week with their 3-1 defeat of Nigeria on Tuesday.

On paper Cameroon, officially rated the best side in Africa, should have taken Gabon to the cleaners.

But Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o and his teammates were unable to respond to Gabon's Hull City striker Daniel Cousin who produced the only goal of the game to go top of Group D.

Veteran Cameroon central defender Rigobert Song became the first man to play in eight Nations Cup tournaments, but he would have surely traded his place in history for a different result.

"We weren't great," conceded Cameroon coach Paul Le Guen. "But above all we can't become destabilised, the last two first round games can allow us to qualify."

Eto'o noted a striking parallel to their experience in Ghana in 2008.

"Two years ago we were in the same situation (having lost their opener and then facing Zambia, whom they meet on Sunday, in their second).

The former three time African Footballer of the

year added: "Losing today is not a big problem but we have to win our next game against Zambia on Sunday.

"We controlled the match but could not find the net."

"We are very pleased we got a win in the first game. Our system worked well and technically we were very good," said Gabon coach and former France star Alain Giresse.

"Even if we finish second in this group we will be happy. What we want is to qualify for the quarter-finals," he added.

Tunisia must have fancied their chances of seizing the initiative but they found themselves trailing after 19 minutes when James Chamanga, who plays his club football in China, charged down the centre and found Jacob Mulenga on his right to score.

Tunisia avoided embarrassment when five minutes before the break teenage striker Youssef Msakni tore the Zambian defence apart down the left, cutting the ball back to Zouhaier Dhaouadhi who slammed it into the roof of the net.

Zambia coach Herve Renard reckoned his side had let slip maximum points, especially after Gabon's win.

"This was two points lost," said the youngest of the five French coaches in the competition.

"We started well but after the goal we didn't show enough discipline."

His Tunisian counterpart, Faouzi Benzarti commented: "We could have won the game with our second half performance, but the draw is fair."

Renard added: "Gabon put up a magnificent performance against Cameroon. Cameroon lost their first game, but they did the same in 2008 and that didn't prevent them going all the way to the final."

Thursday sees the second batch of matches in Group A in Luanda, with Angola facing giantkillers Malawi while Mali tackle Algeria.

IN BRIEF

Milan edge Novara

AFP, Rome

Mathieu Flamini scored the winner nine minutes from time as a second-string AC Milan team beat third division Novara 2-1 at the San Siro on Wednesday to reach the Coppa Italia quarter-finals.

The rossoneri were joined by Juventus and Catania after they recorded victories over Napoli and Genoa respectively.

Milan coach Leonardo made 11 changes to the team that won 3-0 at Juventus on Sunday with Ronaldinho, loan signing David Beckham, Andrea Pirlo and Alessandro Nesta not even included on the bench.

Veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi opened the scoring on 12 minutes but in the first minute of the second period Pablo Gonzalez stunned the San Siro by drawing Novara level.

Flamini had the last word, though, and Milan will play Udinese or Lumezzane in the next round.

Eight people, amongst them two children, were taken to hospital after 20 people were injured in a motorway crash between a lorry and a coach carrying Novara supporters to the game - Novara lies just 40km west of Milan.

Juventus bounced back from their weekend humbling as an Alessandro Del Piero brace, one from the spot, helped them to a 3-0 victory in Turin.

Diego scored the first as a full-strength and attacking Juve blew away Napoli's 14-match unbeaten run under coach Walter Mazzarri.

Catania recorded an impressive 2-1 win away to Genoa to reach the last eight.

Lovenkrands fires Magpies

AFP, London

Danish international striker Peter Lovenkrands scored a hat-trick on Wednesday to ease Newcastle United to a 3-0 victory over fellow Championship side Plymouth Argyle in their FA Cup third round replay.

The 29-year-old - a former Rangers and Schalke 04 player - struck twice in the first-half and added his third in the 72nd minute to send the Championship leaders through to a fourth round meeting away at another second-tier outfit West Bromwich Albion, managed by former FA Cup winner Roberto di Matteo.

Lovenkrands has rarely shone at the Magpies but he more than repaid the faith shown in him by manager Chris Hughton as he struck in the 10th minute shooting home after fine work by man of the match, Argentinian winger Jonas Gutierrez.

Lovenkrands, who appeared at the 2002 World Cup finals and the Euro 2004 finals, struck again five minutes from the break with a header.

Diego's earrings fetch € 25,000

Football

AFP, Bolzano

A pair of diamond earrings seized from football star Diego Maradona raised 25,000 euros (36,250 dollars) at auction on Thursday when they were sold by the Italian tax authorities.

Italy's financial police took the gold earrings when Maradona visited a weight-loss clinic in September 2009 as part of their efforts to recover huge tax debts from the Argentine.

The winning bid more than tripled the

pre-sale estimate of 8,000 euros, but will still not make a significant dent in the 36 million euros Maradona owes the Italian taxman.

Around 30 people took part in the auction in the northeastern town of Bolzano, the winning bid coming from a woman who did not want to give her name or say why she was bidding.

Maradona's debts stem from his days playing in Italy for Napoli, based in the southern town of Naples, from 1986-1991.

The 1986 World Cup winner had a key role in the side's success but failed to pay tax on his earnings and in 2005 a court

ruled he owed 36 million euros.

An Italian taxpayer's association, www.contribuenti.it, estimates that Maradona's debt has accrued a further 22.4 million euros in interest.

A year after the court ruling, in 2006, the tax authorities managed to scrape 11,000 euros off the bill when they seized two expensive watches the Argentine was wearing while visiting Naples for a charity match.

Maradona is now coach of Argentina's national team, which he led through tense qualification for the World Cup finals in South Africa this summer.



The unidentified woman (C), who bought a diamond-studded gold earrings (inset) of Argentine soccer legend Diego Maradona, is escorted after winning the auction for 25 000 euros in Bolzano, northern Italy, yesterday.

PHOTOS: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Cameroon star forward Samuel Eto'o (L) heads the ball as Gabon's Daniel Cousin looks on during their group stage match of the Africa Cup of Nations at the Tundavala Stadium in Lubango, Angola Wednesday.

Essien v Drogba

Football

AFP, Cabinda

Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien faces a great challenge of his international career when he captains Ghana against Ivory Coast here on Friday.

The box-to-box workaholic with the biting tackle and thunderous drive must inspire an injury-ravaged 'Black Stars' side against the under-pressure Africa Cup of Nations title favourites in a crunch Group B clash.

It will be the second fixture in this restive North West Africa enclave where an ambush last Friday claimed two lives as the Togolese delegation crossed the border from a Congo training camp.

Togo later withdrew, leaving Ghana, Ivory Coast and outsiders Burkina Faso fighting for two quarterfinals places and the Burkina threw a spanner in the works by forcing a goalless stalemate with the Ivorians.

Ghana go into the match without midfielders Anthony Annan, Stephen Appiah, Laryea Kingston and central defender John Pantisil and John Mensah because of injuries while Sulley Muntari was axed for indiscipline.

Withdrawals ahead of the tournament saw the number of starlets from the Ghana 2009 World youth championship-winning squad called up by

Serb coach Milovan Rajevac swell to eight.

And Rajevac admitted that several could be in the starting line-up at the 20,000-seat Chiayi Stadium alongside Essien, who has had his own problems ahead of the biennial African football showpiece.

Showcase tear sidelined him in the build-up to the three-week tournament being staged in a Portuguese-speaking country for the first time and he arrived only 48 hours before the kick-off owing to snow-hit London airports.

"He has arrived in Cabinda and after training with his club recently should be physically fit to face the Ivorians," a Ghana team spokesman told reporters here.

The Ivorian 'Elephants', fourth two years ago in Ghana and runners-up to 2006 hosts Egypt, looked far from champions-elect against the ultra-cautious, well drilled Burkina 'Stallions' in the least exciting first round match.

Captain and Chelsea striker Didier Drogba said the aftermath of the Togo tragedy had affected a squad boasting stars like Kolo and Yaya Toure, Emmanuel Eboue, Didier Zokora, Salomon Kalou and Kouassi 'Gervinho' Yao.

Drogba says this will probably be his Nations Cup swansong and craves glory for a squad known as the "golden generation" but without a trophy to show for their sometimes sublime cocktail of skill and steel.

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona lost the first of the three titles they won in an extraordinary 2008-09 season on Wednesday as despite beating Sevilla 1-0 they went out of the Kings Cup on the away goal rule when the last 16 tie finished 2-2 on aggregate.

Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola - who guided Barca to the Cup, league title and Champions League trophy in an amazing debut season as coach - did not take the match lightly playing essentially his first choice team against a side whose league form has fallen away alarmingly having lost their last three matches.

However, it was the hosts who turned on the early pressure with first midfielder Koffi Romaric - who was controversially left out of the Ivory Coast African Cup of Nations squad - powering a header which was punched away by Barcelona goalkeeper Jose Manuel Pinto.

Sevilla - who last won the

Cup in 2007 - had the ball in the net in the 20th minute but striker Alvaro Negredo was somewhat harshly adjudged to have impeded Pinto.

This woke up Barcelona and they poured forward desperate to get back on terms in the tie.

Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic unleashed a fierce shot in the 28th minute only for the ball to go narrowly wide and then saw his 52nd minute header saved by Sevilla goalkeeper and club captain Andres Palop.

The pressure told off eventually in the 64th minute when Spanish international midfielder Xavi's right foot shot beat Palop leaving Barcelona tantalisingly close to reaching the quarter-finals.

Argentinian wizard Lionel Messi then took over the show going close in the 67th minute as his effort scraped the post, then hitting the post with a left footed shot in the 69th minute and then seeing a shot brilliantly turned round the post by Palop five minutes from time.

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool's dreadful season hit crisis point on Wednesday when Rafael Benitez's team were knocked out of the FA Cup after losing 2-1 to Championship strugglers Reading at Anfield.

An own goal by Ryan Bertrand had given Benitez's side the lead over managerless opponents but a stoppage time penalty by Gylfi Sigurdsson sent the tie into extra time.

Substitute Shane Long then headed a 100th minute winner in the third round replay that left Liverpool, already out of the race for the Premier League title and eliminated from the Champions League, shell-shocked.

On a night to forget for Benitez, Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard left the field injured.

Torres, who scored his first Liverpool hat-trick against Reading in 2007, lasted just 29 minutes before he was replaced while Gerrard failed to appear at the start of the second half after complaining of a hamstring problem.

With new Argentine signing Maxi Rodriguez from Atletico Madrid watching from the stands, Benitez made five changes to the side that was held to a 1-1 draw by the

Championship strugglers 11 days earlier in the first match.

There was no sign of Spanish keeper Jose Reina, who played at the Madejski Stadium, as Diego Cavalieri was given a rare chance to shine while teenage Hungarian stopper Peter Gulacsi was on the bench.

Swiss international Philipp Degen was also handed a start although big guns Torres, Gerrard and Alberto Aquilani were wheeled out in an attempt to avoid a shock.

However, it was Reading who looked like the Premier League team for long periods of the first half.

Having endured a wretched first half to the season, the FA Cup remained one of the few pieces of silverware that Liverpool could still win yet Benitez's side seemed disinterested at times on a freezing Merseyside night.

Reading, who are in danger of slipping into the third tier, have managed just five wins in 24 attempts in the league this term yet twice in the space of four first half minutes they successfully sliced open the Liverpool defence.

Polish striker Grzegorz Rasiak fluffed a golden chance from close range after Jamie Carragher had failed to cut out Simon Church's 22nd minute cross.

Then Church, who scored in the first meeting between the clubs, allowed another chance to go begging after failing to connect with Jobi McAnuff's cross.

There was no sense of urgency about

Liverpool - Aquilani, Emiliano Insua and Daniel Agger all guilty of gifting possession too easily. But they were not alone.

Torres endured a frustrating evening and 10 minutes after dragging a rare chance wide, the Spaniard was replaced by David Ngog having earlier taken a knock.

Quite what new signing Rodriguez, who watched the game with a Liverpool scarf wrapped round his neck, made of it all is anyone's guess.

At least Benitez's side finished the half strongly, Yossi Benayoun curling a chance narrowly wide of Adam Federici's post before Reading fell behind in the cruel circumstances.

Having played so well for much of the half, they saw all their hard work undone in a split second as Bertrand deflected a close range shot by Gerrard past his own keeper.

Despite having the lead, Liverpool continued to struggle in the second half.

The loss of Gerrard clearly did not help their cause.

They were again left off the hook when Brian Ingimarsson curling to steer substitute Ivar Howard's free kick into the net.

But in a dramatic twist at the end of normal time, referee Phil Dowd pointed to the penalty spot after Benayoun was adjudged to have fouled substitute Shane Long, Sigurdsson sending Cavalieri the wrong way to force extra time.

Rodriguez joins L'pool

AFP, Liverpool



AFP, Liverpool

Argentina international winger Maxi Rodriguez left Atletico Madrid for Liverpool on Wednesday as the English Premier League giants attempted to rescue their faltering season.

The 29-year-old Rodriguez,

who has moved on a free transfer, signed a three-and-a-half-year deal with Rafael Benitez's side after spending four years in the Spanish capital.

"We were looking for players with character and a good mentality," said Benitez whose team are seventh in the Premier League and five points off the Champions League places.

"He has played for Argentina and Atletico Madrid and is a player with personality.

"He can play in three positions - on the right, left or as a second striker - and is someone with a very positive mentality, which is what we are looking for.

"He is comfortable on the ball, can pass and keep possession. He is good at getting into the box and scoring goals and a good finisher. Every year he gets five to 15 goals from the right side of midfield.

"I know he was not doing as well as he did in the past at Atletico Madrid, but he is doing really well with Argentina and wants to impress for the World Cup."

Rodriguez joined Atletico from Espanyol in 2005 but was replaced as captain this season by Spain's Antonio Lopez.

Benitez hopes Rodriguez will settle quickly with the help of compatriot Javier Mascherano and former Atletico team-mate Fernando Torres.

"He knows Mascherano and Torres and he can provide a lift for some players," said the Liverpool boss.

"I think he will adapt to English football because he is a clever player and takes up good positions on the pitch."

Atletico, who finished fourth in the league last year, have been active in the transfer window after a poor start to the season that has seen them crash out of the Champions League and struggling in the league.

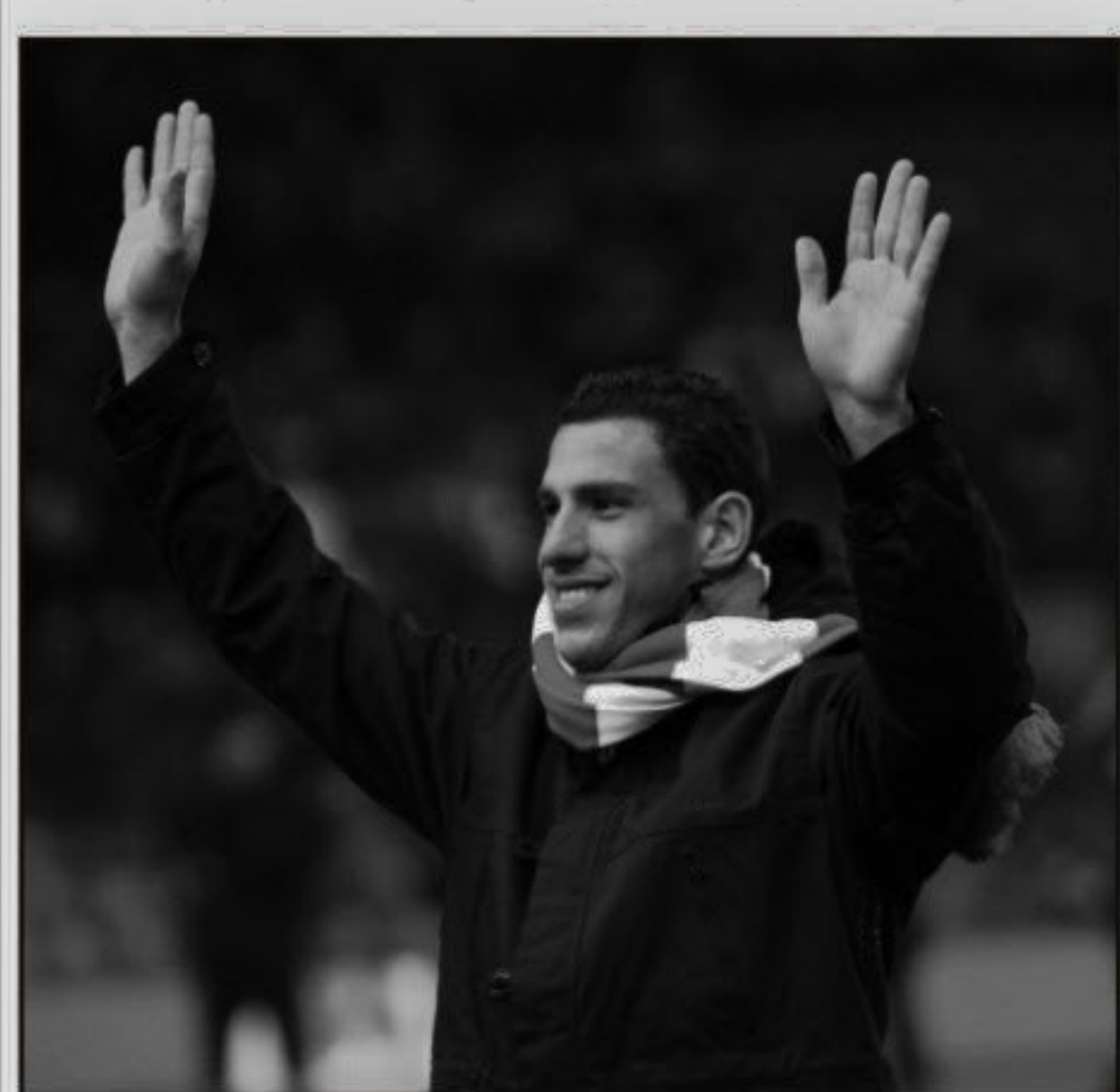


PHOTO: AFP

Argentina winger Maxi Rodriguez acknowledges the crowd's applause at Anfield on Wednesday after signing an 18-month contract with a struggling Liverpool.