

Maradona confident

AFP, Munich



Argentina's larger-than-life coach Diego Maradona thinks that his players can win the World Cup if they show the form that saw them beat fellow favourites Germany 1-0 here on Wednesday.

"I am very happy because my players were so committed. They fulfilled my expectations. After 24 years Argentina needs the title, and playing at this standard we can do it," Maradona said.

"It was a tough game, but we showed that we are a great team, one of the best in the world," he added. "God willing, we are going to give our people a good World Cup."

Ninety-nine days before the World Cup in South Africa, the clash found "El Diez" under pressure after the 1978 and 1986 winners - the latter victory over the then West Germany virtually single-handedly delivered by Maradona - came within a whisker of not qualifying and for his use of over 100 different players.

But his side outshone Germany on Wednesday, leaving the home side, which in contrast to Argentina had looked solid in qualification, looking like the one needing to go back to the drawing board.

"Mistakes get punished at this level," said Germany trainer Joachim Loew, assistant coach when Germany beat Argentina in a penalty shootout in the 2006 World Cup quarterfinals.

"Argentina really was a very, very strong team with lots of strong individual players. We didn't manage to build up pressure today, to make use of chances."

After a slow start as the teams sized each other up, it was Argentina who looked the more

dangerous of the two sides, led from the front by Barcelona star Lionel Messi, FIFA's world footballer of the year 2009.

In the 38th minute, Angel di Maria dribbled his way past a sea of German defenders to fire off a shot.

Germany 'keeper Rene Adler, fresh from being named Germany's first-choice goalie for the World Cup this week, pulled off a spectacular save, deflecting the ball onto the woodwork.

But then just before the break, disaster struck for the Germans with a slip-up from Adler, who plays for high-flying Bundesliga outfit Bayer Leverkusen, that suddenly made his selection look not quite so shrewd.

Adler sprinted out of his goal to intercept the ball from a fast-approaching Gonzalo Higuain, but the Real Madrid star won the challenge, rounded the 'keeper and tapped into the open goal.

The episode was much to the disapproval of long-term 'keeper Oliver "King" Kahn, now resigned to the commentary box.

"If you leave your goal you have to make sure you get the ball. Otherwise you should stay on your line," he said.

The Germans looked in better nick in the second half, winning more possession and creating more pressure in the opponents' half, but it was to no avail as the visitors held firm.

Germany's best chances came through Cacau, who has been on sparkling form in the Bundesliga, with shots in the 77th and 83rd minutes, the second a half-volley which whistled over the crossbar.

"Our mistake was not to take more risks up front," said Germany captain Michael Ballack, sporting a black eye from Chelsea's recent Champions League defeat to Inter Milan.

Argentina is drawn against Nigeria, South Korea and Greece in the World Cup, which runs from June 11 to July 11 in South Africa. Germany will face Ghana, Serbia and Australia.



Argentina starlet Gonzalo Higuain screams for joy after scoring the all-important goal against Germany during their international friendly in Munich on Wednesday.

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDLIES Argentina, Spain win

Football

AFP, Paris

Europe's brightest hopes to lift the World Cup on July 11 in South Africa suffered mixed fortunes in Wednesday's friendly internationals.

European champions Spain produced an assured display to beat 2006 finalists France 2-0 - their first win in France for 42 years - and provoked the home fans into regular bouts of calling for unpopular coach Raymond Domenech to resign.

Domenech has steadfastly refused to step down on the regular occasions that the matter has been broached and has also enjoyed the strong support of the head of the French Football Federation, but even the usually imperturbable coach sounded a little less confident than usual.

"Nothing is worrying me for the moment.... I am not as catastrophic as you make me out to be," said the 58-year-old, who also took aim at the crowd for booing the players and chanting 'ole, ole' in tribute to the Spanish.

Domenech is due to step down after the finals, but another coach whose future is uncertain Germany's Joachim Loew was given a reality check in Munich as Argentina - coached by the ever unpredictable Diego Maradona - outclassed them to win 1-0.

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Germany beat Argentina in a penalty shootout in the 2006 World Cup quarterfinals.

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Reigning world champions Italy were held 0-0 in Monte Carlo by African qualifiers Cameroon in a dull affair while England came from 1-0 down to beat African champions Egypt 3-1 with Peter Crouch belying being dropped from the Spurs first team notching a double.

England coach Fabio Capello often appears grudging in his praise for Crouch but this time he was unstinting in lauding the striker who has scored 20 times in 37 internationals.

"Crouch is a big option for me because sometimes you can play long ball. Today we didn't, and he played very well with one touch, two touches. In the second half he made the difference," said the Italian.

Holland had little trouble in recording a 2-1 home victory over the United States, who are in England's group in South Africa.

It wasn't a great night for several of the outsiders for glory in June.

Hosts South Africa struggled to a 1-1 draw against African minnows Namibia, and the hosts had to come from behind to finish the match all-square.

The only bright spot was that it extended their unbeaten run since former Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira took over.

"We had control of the ball in the first half but the last ball was not good enough to score," said Parreira, who has led Bafana Bafana to two wins and three draws since he took over from fellow Brazilian Joel Santana in November.

Fellow African finalists enjoyed mixed fortunes with Algeria slipping to a 3-0 humbling at home to Serbia and Africa Cup of Nations finalists Ghana also lost, 2-1 away at Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Ivory Coast showed they had not got over the traumatic loss to Algeria in the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finals putting up a limp display against South Korea in a 2-0 defeat in London - hardly an advertisement to encourage Dutch coach Guus Hiddink to agree to coach them at the finals.

Nigeria, though, were convincing 5-2 winners over Democratic Republic of Congo.

Senegal will not be there to try and repeat their heroics from the 2002 finals - where they reached the quarterfinals - but they inflicted a wake-up call to South Africa-bound Greece, beating the 2004 European champions 2-0 with in-form Marseille striker Mamadou Niang getting their first.

Turkey - the team who ended Senegal's World Cup dreams in 2002 - are also absentees from this summer's fiesta but they gave finalists Honduras a sharp lesson in finishing with a 2-0 victory in Istanbul while Norway beat Slovakia, who will be making their first appearances at the finals, 1-0.

Domenech hits out at fans

Football

AFP, Paris

France's increasingly embattled coach Raymond Domenech turned his fire not for the first time on the French supporters after they regularly cried for him to resign and booed the players during his side's 2-0 defeat by European champions Spain on Wednesday.

The 58-year-old became the first France coach in 42 years to oversee defeat at home to the Spanish, who at times made the 2006 World Cup finalists look second rate in what was hardly an encouraging omen for June's World Cup finals in South Africa.

However, the former hardman defender displayed nothing but contempt for the supporters, who also resorted to chanting 'ole, ole' in tribute to the visitors flowing passing moves that were a class above anything the hosts could put together for a sustained length of time.

"There were even cries of 'Ole Ole' after five minutes," moaned Domenech, whose popularity has nosedived since guiding France to an unexpected place in the 2006 final where they lost in a penalty shootout to Italy.

"I find that is a pity, the players need the public's support, even when we are suffering at the hands of the European champions."

Domenech, who astonished many with his public proposal on French television to his TV sports presenter girlfriend immediately following the first round exit at Euro 2008 rather than answering questions on the humiliating elimination, even took succour in the loss based on similar previous experiences.

"At this stage of the year we always lose," said Domenech, who won eight caps for France from 1973-79.

"The France players need support. I have trouble understanding that they don't have this support. But the important thing is to prepare well for the World Cup."

Domenech, though, will not only wake up to more headlines querying his suitability to take France to South Africa in June but also another headache in whether it is time to demote icon Thierry Henry to the bench after a listless display by the team captain.

"Everyone has known 'Titi' (Henry) to have played better," admitted Domenech.

"But the fact that he hasn't been playing regularly at club

level for Barcelona has posed him problems in coming straight in and starting such a high quality match.

"However, the goal for preparing for the World Cup finals is to raise everybody onto the same level. Of course Henry's performance does raise several questions. But nothing is worrying me for the moment."

Henry, who was jeered when he was replaced during the second-half, conceded that he had not been at his best as he returned to the Stade de France for the first time since his infamous handball that created the goal which ended the Republic of Ireland's hopes of reaching the World Cup finals last November.

"I was short of my best form, and it was a handicap," said Henry.

"I lacked rhythm, it was clear to see that and in a match against a great team where one has to run after the ball, that is hard."

However, 32-year-old Henry, France's record goalscorer with 51 goals, said that he was confident he would be back at his best level come the finals.

"That (his playing time and form) will not be a handicap for the World Cup, because we will have a huge amount of training camps from now on, but this evening (Wednesday), it was a handicap."

Both Domenech and Henry - whose relationship has been called into question on several occasions with the captain having to deny he has quarrelled with the coach in front of the players - agreed on one thing...that Spain were awesome.



Spain striker David Villa (C) scores the opening goal against France during their international friendly at the Stade de France on Wednesday.

2010 WC QUALIFIERS FRIENDLY RESULTS

Results of international football friendlies involving 2010 World Cup finalists qualifiers played on Wednesday (* denotes World Cup finals qualifiers):

At Coimbra
*Portugal 2 (Almeida 36, Moutinho 90+5) China 0

At Ljubljana
*Slovenia 4 (Novakovic 13, Cesar 30, Kirm 34, Jokic 67) Qatar 1 (Montezine 40)

At Lagos
*Nigeria 5 (Utaka 11, Ezimorah 31, Obinna 52, Idehem 28, 65) Democratic Republic of Congo 2 (Mbenza 43, 71)

At Sarajevo
Bosnia-Herzegovina 2 (Ibisevic 40, Pjanic 65) *Ghana 1 (Muntari 22) At London

*England 3 (Crouch 56, 80, Wright Phillips 75) Egypt 1 (Zidan 23) 1 At Paris

*France 0 *Spain 2 (Villa 21, Sergio Ramos 45+1) At Amsterdam

*Holland 2 (Kuyt 40-pen, Huntelaar 73) *United States 1 (Bocanegra 88) At Monte Carlo

*Italy 0 *Cameroon 0 At Munich
*Germany 0 *Argentina 1 (Higuain 45) At St. Gallen

*Switzerland 1 (Inler 29-pen) *Uruguay 3 (Forlan 34, Suarez 49, Cavani 87) At Algiers

*Algeria 0 *Serbia 3 (Pantelic 15, Kuzmanovic 54, Tosic 64) At Durban

*South Africa 1 (Mphela 70) Namibia 1 (Bester 41) At Istanbul

Turkey 2 (Emre Gincor 41, Hamit 55) *Honduras 0 At Bilbao

Athletic Bilbao (ESP) 1 (De Cerio 80) *Paraguay 3 (Cardozo 13, 42, Santa Cruz 22) At Zilina

*Slovakia 0 Norway 1 (Moldskred 67) At Volos

*Greece 0 Senegal 2 (Niang 71, Ndaw 80) At London

*Ivory Coast 0 *South Korea 2 (Lee Dong-gook 4, Kwak Tae-hwi 90) At Pasadena

*Mexico 2 (Hernandez 53, Vela 57) *New Zealand 0

Lampard hails spirit

Football

AFP, London

Frank Lampard insists England's 3-1 victory over Africa Cup of Nations champions Egypt shows the team's spirit has not been affected by the scandal involving deposed captain John Terry.

Fabio Capello's side were in action at Wembley on Wednesday for the first time since Terry was stripped of the England captaincy following his alleged affair with Vanessa Perroncel, the former girlfriend of international team-mate Wayne Bridge.

Terry gave a solid enough performance at the heart of England's defence and received a relatively uncritical reception from the Wembley crowd, but it was the manner of England's fightback from a goal down that most pleased Lampard.

The Chelsea midfielder believes England's win, secured thanks to Peter Crouch's double and a Shaun Wright-Phillips goal, proves

the squad remains united.

"We showed spirit and togetherness on the pitch. It has only been two or three days together but everyone has been concentrating on their football and we've tried to block out anything else," Lampard said.

"I think most fans understand that booing, whether it's to do with on or off the pitch issues, doesn't help."

"Now there is a feeling where we have to concentrate on taking out the negativity. If there is negativity around the game it can affect people and no-one needs that."

"People talk about spirit and analyse life in the hotel but it is more important to play hard together out on the pitch. We need to carry on doing that to have any chance in the World Cup."

Lampard - who squandered two great chances in the first-half - was delighted to see Terry return to international action without any major problems and he revealed the defender had been his usual self in the dressing room.

"He played very well. It was a difficult game because they were very sharp up front. They have top strikers. But he did well as he always does," Lampard added.

"It's an old cliché but every player should act as if he had the armband and John does that and will continue to do that regardless of not having the armband."

Although the World Cup in South Africa is less than 100 days away, Lampard admits there is still room for improvement in England's play after Egypt caused them significant problems in the first half.

Lampard said: "It was a good test for us. Egypt are a very good team and not to be underestimated."

"But I think there is always room for improvement. You never want to relax. We need to win the ball back higher up the pitch. If you can do that it gives you the chance to attack teams when they are more open."

"It's three months before the World Cup and we don't want to think there is no more room for improvement. We want to strive for us."

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDLY Korea slay Elephants

Football

AFP, London

South Korea coach Huh Jong-moo believes his side's impressive victory over the Ivory Coast leaves them perfectly positioned to make an impact at this year's World Cup.

Goals from Lee Dong-gook and Kwak Tae-hwi secured a 2-0 win against the Elephants at Loftus Road as South Korea impressed on the counter-attack at the home of second division Queens Park Rangers on Wednesday.

The 2002 World Cup semi-finalists face Argentina, Nigeria and Greece in their Pool in South Africa, and Huh is adamant his side's preparations are going to plan perfectly.

"This game was excellent practice for us before the World Cup," he said.

"We have to play Nigeria and while their style is not exactly the same, Ivory Coast are another African team and it was important for us to go up against a team like that before we go to South Africa."

"Of course it will be tough for us in the World Cup but we have confidence that we can perform and are looking forward to the challenge."

Huh's optimism was bolstered after South Korea made light work of the much-fancied Ivory Coast.

They took the lead after just four minutes as Lee showed superb technical ability to hit a first-time volley past Boubacar Barry from 12 yards, before the Ivorians, led by Chelsea striker Didier Drogba, upped the pace.

But after counter-attacking with precision, South Korea added a second shortly before the final whistle as Kwak headed home from close range.

Yet Huh tempered his praise

with a note of caution, insisting his side can take nothing for granted as they prepare for the tournament.

"We played very well and it is a good win for us but there is a lot of work to do before the World Cup."

He added: "We are not meeting again until May now, but I will give the players homework to do on our own."

"I want them to study videos of the teams we shall be playing as they all need to improve before we go to South Africa."

And Huh reserved particular praise for his European-based players, with captain Park Ji-sung to the fore as South Korea

exploited the gaps Ivory Coast left at the back.

The Manchester United star was inches away from scoring, and Huh believes it is the experience of players such as Park which is crucial to his team.

The players who play in Europe lead this team and you saw that out there," he explained. "The Ivory Coast have more experience and quality but we attack and defend as a team and we deserved to win."

But while Huh was upbeat, his Ivorian counterpart, Kouadio Georges, refused to speak to the press after this match.



South Korea striker Lee Dong-Gook (R) celebrates his goal against Ivory Coast during their international friendly at the Loftus Road Stadium on Wednesday.