

# Spain 'not favourites'

THE GUARDIAN



Sergio Ramos has tried to ease the pressure on his Spain teammates by dismissing the idea they should be considered favourites to lift the World Cup.

The European champions boast a formidable record in international football over the last three years and are widely favoured in South Africa. But Ramos believes there are several teams who can challenge over the course of the next few weeks.

"Well, I think in these kinds of events you always have a surprise," the Real Madrid defender said.

"Obviously the favourites are Italy, Brazil, Portugal, Holland... In this year's tournament we will see so many good players which make the World Cup so interesting and exciting. So,

we pass the status of being the favourite to the other teams.

"We do not like to be seen as favourites but of course we have a strong team and if we do the things well as we did in the European Cup, step by step and respecting every team, we will play an important role. I would be happy reaching the 11th of July, the day of the final."

Ramos' Madrid teammate Alvaro Arbeloa is likewise looking at others to carry the weight of expectation.

"Well, for me favourites are Brazil," he said. "They have a lot of experience, the team which won the most titles, they are a team which are always dangerous and to be considered. I think Spain and Brazil are the favourites."

"Italy are always very strong, although it does not look like this before the tournament. England with Capello are very good. Then teams like France, Germany and Portugal who have great individual players and, yes, Argentina, why not?"

## THE KNOWLEDGE

The only side to win the World Cup after having won the European Championships are West Germany

Spain have won 96% of their matches under Vicente del Bosque's management (24/25).

# Bizarre goals on menu

INTERNET, undated



Hugo Lloris was one of the first goalkeepers to openly criticize the balls to be used at World Cup 2010, and the France custodian has reiterated his position during a press conference, stating that "bizarre" goals will be scored over the course of the next month and lamenting the increasing uncertainty of the shot-stopper's role.

Lloris was beaten by a wickedly swerving ball in the 1-0 friendly defeat against China, which hasn't helped him make friends with the already infamous Jabulani.

"We need to be even faster in the analysis of the trajectory," the Olympique Lyonnais keeper explained. "I would prefer it if I made a technical mistake; at least I could blame myself."

"The ball moves from right to left, from high to low, from right to left. Even the attackers are embarrassed at the training centres. It is difficult to analyse the point of impact between the ball and the head or foot."

"There will be many goals, beautiful and bizarre. The ball is light. It seems that it is made of plastic. It is far from a leather ball. And as you go up in altitude, the more you will have problems."

"We all realise that these balls make our task difficult. I must be constantly alert, focused, vigilant and make the correct choices."



# Ballack, Blues part ways

## Cole also departs

### Football

INTERNET, undated

German international Michael Ballack will be leaving Chelsea after the English club decided against renewing its contract with the injured player.

"We were unable to agree on further cooperation," Ballack's agent Michael Becker said.

Ballack was not the only major star to be sorted out at Chelsea as English international Joe Cole was also not offered a new contract after seven seasons with the London club.

Chelsea and Ballack's agent have been holding talks for months. The main sticking point in the negotiations had been the length of the deal.

Chelsea were hoping to lock on the midfielder on a one-year contract while Ballack wanted more certainty heading towards the 2012 European Championship.

The breakup comes quite surprising as the Goerlitz native would have gladly stayed in



BALLACK

COLE

London, where he was well-respected.

"When it comes to experience there is no better man for the job. 'Bally' is an extremely strong character and has been a massive influence. He has also contributed well on the goals front," said Chelsea assistant coach Ray Wilkins on the club's website.

Chelsea head coach Carlo Ancelotti also had hoped the club could retain his No. 13, who was one of the most popular Blues.

# Stage set for duo

REUTERS, Pretoria



Argentina's Lionel Messi heads into the World Cup as the player everyone wants to see but it will be the strengths and weaknesses of coach Diego Maradona that will determine how far the South Americans progress.

Argentina are clear favourites to top Group B ahead of Nigeria, Greece and South Korea but the critics will be looking closely during their opening games to see if Maradona, an inexperienced coach, has finally got the balance right.

He was often at the center of controversy in the World Cup as a player -- his 'Hand of God' goal in the 1986 finals, which Argentina went on to win, and expulsion at the 1994 tournament due to a failed doping test ensured he hogged the headlines.

But this time it is his decision making that is under scrutiny and he certainly has not played safe -- leaving out experienced Inter Milan pair Javier Zanetti and Esteban Cambiasso.

There have been signs, though, that Maradona's team have put their shaky qualification form behind them and the abundance of talent in the squad, particularly the out-

standing Messi, puts them among the genuine contenders for the title.

Nigeria are their opponent's in the opening game of the group and the African side, who failed to qualify four years ago, are skipped by the experienced Nwankwo Kanu and have seasoned Swede Lars Lagerback in charge.

The Nigeria squad is packed with players performing weekly in the top European leagues which has given them the confidence to

## Diego's mad cap training

INTERNET

Never one to shy away from controversy Argentina boss Diego Maradona has raised eyebrows in South Africa by overseeing a mad-cap training session.

The session ended with Maradona joining a number of his players covering in goal while they had footballs fired at them at their University of Pretoria High Performance Centre base.

Two teams played out a short match and the victors were allowed to hammer balls at their vanquished opponents.

Hardly the treatment stars such as Sergio Aguero, Walter Samuel, Jonas Gutierrez will be used to at their clubs.

believe they can mount a strong challenge.

Greece showed when they won Euro 2004 that despite lacking big-name players, their German coach Otto Rehhagel can get the best out of a hard-working unit and they did well to fight past Ukraine in the World Cup qualification playoff.

It will be interesting to see, after the poor defense of their European title two years ago, whether the 71-year-old Rehhagel, at his first World Cup, can recapture the remarkable fighting spirit and tactical discipline of six years ago.

South Korea, semifinalists when co-hosting the finals with Japan eight years ago, were less impressive in 2006 but they bring a team with plenty of European league experience such as captain Park Ji-Sung of Manchester United.

After being coached by Dutchmen Guus Hiddink and Dick Advocaat at the past two World Cups, they now have Korean Huh Jung-Moo in charge and he is expected to bring a more conservative approach.

Huh will come up against Maradona for the first time since they met on the field in the 1986 finals, when the Korean's tough man-marking led the Argentine to recently talk of his opponents playing "taekwondo not football."



An artist puts finishing touches on a wax model of Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo after it was unveiled during a photocall at Madame Tussauds museum in London on Wednesday.

## Barca extend with Pedro and Xavi

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona have rewarded striker Pedro with an improved contract until 2015 and given midfielder Xavi options to his extend until 2016.

The Spain internationals will put pen to paper before they fly to the World Cup

## THE KNOWLEDGE

Barcelona are the most represented club at the 2010 World Cup with 15 players

finals in South Africa, Barca said on their website (www.fcbarcelona.com) on Wednesday.

Pedro, 22, has agreed a one-year extension on his current deal after establishing himself in the first team with 23 goals in all competitions last season.

Xavi, 30, has an agreement until 2014 but has the chance to extend the deal a further two more years if he plays at least 50 per cent of the games in each of the preceding two seasons.

## TEAM PROFILE

# Dutch set to sparkle

AFP, George



A talented Netherlands squad start as firm favourites in a tight Group E with Japan, Cameroon and Denmark set to fight for second place.

A red-hot qualifying campaign saw the Dutch sail through to the finals without dropping a point and coach Bert van Marwijk is happy with the way the draw panned out for his star-sprinkled team.

Big things are expected from the in-form 'Oranje', currently ranked four in the world behind Brazil, Spain and Portugal, although star striker Arjen Robben's thigh injury has clouded their preparations.

"A lot of people will probably think that we will make it to the next round without too much trouble. However, our opponents shouldn't be underestimated," said Van Marwijk, who replaced Marco van Basten after Euro 2008.

The Dutch are making their ninth World Cup appearance, but too often their attractive style has failed to translate into success - runner-up spots

during their heyday in 1974 and 1978 are all they have to show for their efforts.

But with players like Robben, Wesley Sneijder, Mark van Bommel and Robin van Persie at his disposal, the pressure is on to finally lift the trophy.

The Dutch can be vulnerable at the back and must be

which Italy are favourites to win, while Slovakia, Paraguay and New Zealand will battle for second.

Arsenal's inconsistent but sometimes deadly Nicklas Bendtner is Denmark's star man, while players such as Jon Dahl Tomasson, Dennis Rommedahl and Michael

big countries," he said.

"However, we'll do our very best. Denmark have produced plenty of upsets in football history, so why not again?"

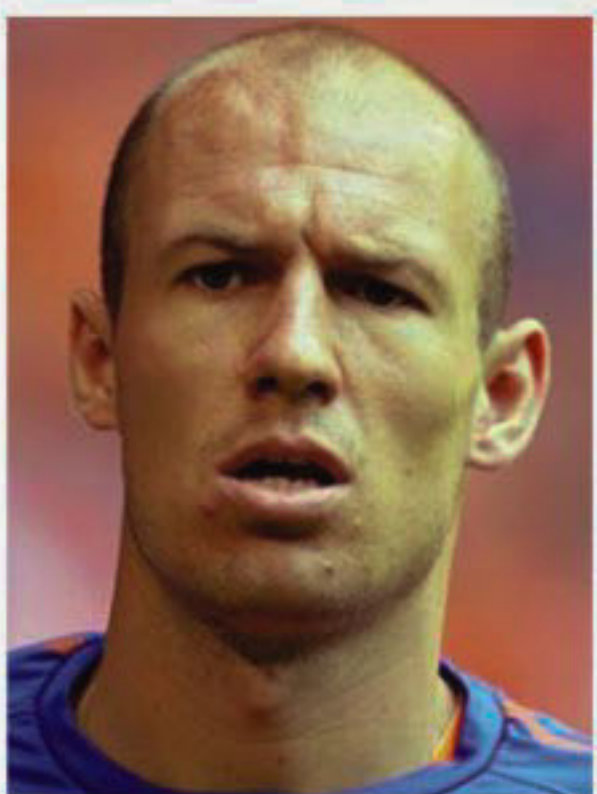
No African team boasts more experience than Paul Le Guen's Cameroon, whose appearance in South Africa will be a record sixth at a World Cup for an African nation.

Cameroon can be physically intimidating and will be buoyed by 'home' support. They also boast three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o, who rivals Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba as the best striker from the continent.

Japan are three-time Asian champions and carry high hopes into the tournament with former Celtic man Shunsuke Nakamura their talisman.

Despite being mocked for being unrealistic at home, Japan coach Takeshi Okada continues to insist his side can make the semifinals.

"It will be the fourth World Cup finals for Japan and we are aiming for a top four spot. We don't intend to change our goal and we continue to aim for a top four spot," he has repeatedly said.



ROBBEN

careful of Denmark, who surprised many observers by finishing ahead of Portugal in qualifying, and Japan, a tenacious side who have reached the round of 16 before.

If Holland top the group, their opponent in the next round will be the second-placed team in Group H,



SNEIJDER

Silberbauer are well-respected.

Bendtner believes the Danes can make an impression.

"It's important that we stay realistic. Of course we're going there to win the tournament, but having said that, we don't have the same means as other

## BENDTNER'S GOT HEART

Nicklas Bendtner expects to be fit to face Holland on Monday. The Arsenal striker has been out since May with a groin injury but yesterday he took part in full training. "I'm one of those with the best heart rate in the squad," Bendtner said. "The football side of things shouldn't be any problem either."

## NEILL SEEKS INSPIRATION

Lucas Neill says Australia will draw inspiration from Brad Jones's son, who is battling leukemia. The back-up goalkeeper left the squad at the weekend after his four-year-old son Luca was diagnosed. Neill, the captain, told Fox Sports: "[It] gives us just that extra inspiration we needed."

## CAPELLO HITS OUT AT PHOTOGRAPHERS

England coach Fabio Capello angrily scolded a group of photographers ahead of Wednesday's training session at their Royal Bafokeng World Cup base.

Capello took exception to his players being filmed inside a building that also houses a medical room and rounded on those responsible, demanding to know: "Why do you take photos of the rooms? No excuses."

It is the first time the Italian has lost his temper with the journalists who follow the England national side and is thought to stem from pictures being taken of the players on their safari on Tuesday.

After scolding the photographers, Capello then stood, angrily staring them down, before turning to walk onto the training pitch, with his players following shortly afterwards.

Several foreign journalists in South Africa to cover the June 11 - July 11 World Cup have been robbed by armed men in their hotel rooms.

## ROBBEN OUT OF DUTCH OPENER

Arjen Robben's recovery from a partial hamstring tear is on track but he will not be fit in time for Holland's first match against Denmark, the coach, Bert van Marwijk, said last night. Robben is expected to fly out to South Africa to rejoin the squad on Saturday and may be available for the match against Japan on 19 June.

## VIOLENT WELCOME FOR JOURNALISTS

Radio 702 reported that the journalists from Portugal and Spain were robbed at their hotel in Magaliesburg, which is north-west of Johannesburg early morning.

A journalist said that some of his colleagues were caught up in the robbery, during which professional photo equipment, cash and passports were stolen.

"A group of armed men entered the hotel and started looking for valuables. They targeted the journalists' rooms. They stole mostly professional equipment. Everybody is fine and no one was injured."

"They stole all the equipment. TVs, cameras, laptops and cell phones," another journalist said.

Police spokesperson Sally De Beer said that nobody had been injured during the robbery. "There were no injuries and no arrests as yet but we are hopeful that we will track the suspects down and arrest them," she said.

Security has been one of the major topics ahead of the World Cup and there had been some doubts whether South African officials could guarantee the safety of visitors.

## SILENT PROTEST BY GALLAS

William Gallas is refusing to speak to the media. The France and Arsenal defender was due to meet reporters in Kynsna yesterday but chose not to attend. François Manardo, the team's spokesman, said: "William has decided not to speak to the media for the duration of the World Cup."

"Whatever happens in our squad stays in our squad," added the goalkeeper Hugo Lloris. Reports in France suggest Gallas is angry at the decision to make Patrice Evra captain.

## NO NOSE-PICKING, SAYS KAISER

Franz Beckenbauer had seen it all. That's why he wanted his German national team to sing the German national anthem at the

1990 World Cup. The German football legend admitted that his teammates did not really sing the Deutschlandlied during his playing days for Germany. So one of the things he implemented at Italy 1990 was his players at least mouth the words.

"Some guys would pick their nose. Others were chewing their gum. And others were just looking around," said Beckenbauer. The Kaiser said he understands that some of the current Germans have a migrant background and don't want to sing. But he always did - even during his time in the United States. "The American national anthem was played before every single game. And I sang every time. For me it was a way to prepare for the game."

-Agencies