



Thrilling draw in opener

SOCERNET

Rafael Marquez denied hosts South Africa a dream start to the World Cup with his goal 11 minutes from time earning Mexico a deserved draw at Soccer City.

After struggling through the first half, the home side came out firing after the break and took the lead through Siphiwe Tshabalala.

But after missing plenty of chances to build on their advantage, they saw their lead cancelled out by the Barcelona defender.

Katlego Mphela could have snatched victory at the death, but his strike found the base of the post as both sides had to settle for a share of the spoils.

After an entertaining opening ceremony in Johannesburg, Bafana Bafana failed to make the most of their advantage, much to the disappointment of the 85,000 crowd.

The visitors almost stunned their hosts inside the first 120 seconds, but were thwarted by a last-ditch block by Aaron Mokoena.

It came after Paul Aguilar's cross from the right was not convincingly cleared by Itumeleng Khune and Giovani dos Santos' shot was repelled by the South Africa captain with an empty net gaping.

Steven Pienaar sent South Africa's only real early chance - a 25-yard free-kick - disappointingly over, while Efrain Juarez became the first player to be booked at the World Cup for trying to slow down play.

Dos Santos again came close when a quick counter-attack resulted in the Galatasaray forward striking a rising shot narrowly wide.

There was a slightly nervy moment for Mexico after 22 minutes when Oscar Perez fumbled and then re-gathered Pienaar's cross.

Fortunately for the goalkeeper, there were no attacking players close enough to capitalise.

Bongani Khumalo then diverted another Dos Santos shot away for a corner, before there was a lucky off-side escape when Khune flapped at a corner - but came so far he played Carlos Vela offside as the Arsenal forward latched on to a flick-on and tapped in. The home side finally came out of their shell in the closing moments of the half - Mphela failing to connect with Tshabalala's well-floated cross and Kagiso Dikgacoi heading a corner wide.

Lucas Thwala, who was stretched down the left in the opening 45 minutes, was replaced by Tsepo Masilela at half time as Carlos Alberto Parreira looked to shore up in defence.

But it was in attack where they prospered, taking the lead through a fine Tshabalala effort after 55 minutes.

The Kaizer Chiefs midfielder was put through on the left by an excellent ball from Teko Modise and unleashed a powerful cross-



ASPECTACULAR FIRST GOAL: South Africa midfielder Siphiwe Tshabalala (R) shoots to score the opening goal of the World Cup during their Group A first round match against Mexico at the Soccer City stadium in Johannesburg yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



goal shot that gave Perez no chance.

The home side were clearly lifted by the goal and Modise should have doubled the advantage after the hour mark when Mphela's shot was deflected into his path six yards out - but he struck his effort wide.

Veteran Cuauhtemoc Blanco was thrown into the mix in place of Vela, but again it was the home side through Modise who engineered a good chance, but failed to capitalise.

Javier Hernandez also entered the fray but it was another substitute that set up the equaliser - Guardado's cross from the left looping over the head of Mokoena and Marquez took a touch before firing in.

Mphela showed good pace minutes from time when he outpaced Rodriguez, but his shot could not beat the post.

PREVIEW

Diego set to attack

AFP, Johannesburg

Diego Maradona is set to unleash his formidable trio of goal poachers to get Argentina off to a flying start at the World Cup against Nigeria here on Saturday.

The two-time world champions boast a salivating forward line of Lionel Messi, Carlos Tevez and Gonzalo Higuain and coach Maradona is tinkering with pitching in all three in an attacking 3-4-3 formation at Ellis Park.

Between them the dazzling trio netted more than 80 league goals last term for Barcelona, Manchester City and Real Madrid.

Argentine fans' favourite Tevez said he hoped to "get the chance to show the coach what I can do. We have great players [and] don't feel my place is assured."

The Argentines may have stumbled across the finish line in qualification for South Africa 2010, but Maradona has



PHOTO: AFP

THE MEN WHO MATTER: Lionel Messi and his Argentina captain Javier Mascherano (L) gesticulate during a training session at the University's High Performance Centre in Pretoria on Thursday. The eyes of the world would surely be on Messi as the two-time world champions take on Nigeria today.

at his disposal a squad of sumptuous talent in his first World Cup as coach.

Indications are that Maradona, who inspired Argentina as the world's greatest player to World Cup triumph in 1986, will go with a three-man backline enabling him to field a three-man strikeforce.

Marseille centre-half Gabriel Heinze said this week

that "Argentina will always go after the game" and not sit tight and be ultra-cautious.

Saturday's opening Group B game offers Messi, the world's best player, the ideal stage to stake an early claim as the star of the sensational club with Barcelona.

"Player for player, there is no better national team than ours," Messi said.

"At this stage I don't have to prove anything. I've come there to do things well for me and for my teammates."

Heinze moved to ease the enormous burden of expectations on Messi to perform, saying that Argentina is not dependent on the diminutive playmaker.

"Everybody expects something whenever Lionel touches the ball, that's normal, he's the best in the world and is in his best moment, but Argentina do not depend on him but on the group," Heinze said.

"I would love to see that, I certainly would appreciate it if he had the same impact on the World Cup as I had in 1986," he said.

"But I think behind Lionel there's a whole team that should back him up and he should be the cherry on the cake."

The mood inside Africa's most populous nation is not overly optimistic about the Super Eagles' chances against Argentina.

But their veteran Portsmouth striker Nwankwo

Maradona's Messi hope

AFP, Pretoria

Argentina coach Diego Maradona on Friday expressed his belief that Barcelona's Argentine superstar Lionel Messi can emulate his own achievements from 24 years ago.

"I would love to see that, I certainly would appreciate it if he had the same impact on the World Cup as I had in 1986," he said.

"I believe it's the team that makes you win these very difficult tournaments."

Argentina have beaten Nigeria twice at the World Cup -- 1-0 in 2002 and 2-1 in 1994 -- and will be favoured to do so again.

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Kanu holds out hope that Nigeria will not be intimidated in what will be their first competitive game under Swedish coach Lars Lagerback.

"Argentina have the big-name players and everyone respects them. We also acknowledge that they are good and great players," he said.

"But Argentina also have the same respect for us because they know the quality of our team and know that there is plenty that we can come up with at any time."

All the same the pressure will be on Argentina to come through their opening match in South Africa with a win to set a platform for a crack at a third world title.

Everton defender Yobo faces one of the most challenging assignments in world football -- trying to stop Messi. The reigning world footballer of the year possesses all the skills and is a real handful. How Yobo and the Nigerian defence cope with his threat will play a major part in the outcome.

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