



REAL MASKS! Argentine supporters are about to don masks of Lionel Messi and Diego Maradona prior to their match against South Korea at the Soccer City Stadium in Soweto yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

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Where have the goals gone?

INTERNET

Some day soon this World Cup is going to start, but after the first round of fixtures there is a sense that it is still very much in the stage of phony war.

The most obvious sign of the tentativeness of much of the play is the number of goals.

Football is never going to go back to the days of the 1950s and four goals a game, but 25 goals in the first 16 matches - 1.56 goals per game - compares badly with everything that has gone before.

The lowest scoring World Cup in history was Italia 90, which yielded just 2.31.

The first round of games in 1998 produced 37 goals, in 2002 46 and in 2006 39; the 25 in this tournament, then, is 50 per cent worse than anything that has gone before.

The question then is why. Many have blamed the ball. Many anticipated it would be difficult for goalkeepers, but outfielders seem to find it difficult to control.

Figures are hard to come by, but several players have complained about

its tendency to fly without dip, and observational evidence suggests a lot of shots blasted over and a lot of overhit crosses.

Opta statistics show only 33.44 per cent of shots have been on target in this tournament - down around 10 per cent on the Premier League and Champions League last season and the World Cup in 2006.

Then again, that may be the fault of the altitude - thinner air means fewer molecules to generate friction, and thus spin is diminished - which may also explain the tendency for crosses and shots to be overhit.

When the African Cup of Nations in Mali in 2002 produced 1.5 goals per game, it was blamed on the poor quality of the pitches; that is clearly not the issue here.

Some have suggested that the lack of minnows this time around means there are no hammerings being meted out, which keeps the goal average down.

The point is valid if comparison is being made to, say, 1954, when South Korea were beaten 9-0 by Hungary and

7-0 by Turkey, but the truth is that real m i s m a t c h e s a r e extreme ly rare in recent World Cups.

In the first round of fixtures in those last three tournaments, only four games yielded a winning margin of three goals or more - France beat South Africa 3-0 in 1998, Germany beat Saudi Arabia 8-0 in 2002, and 2006 saw Spain beat Ukraine 4-0 and the Czech Republic beat the United States 3-0.

Perhaps, then, the issue is tactical. Some have suggested the move towards one-centre-forward systems - 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1 - is essentially negative, and leads to dull midfield battles.

So there may be a tactical issue, but the real issue seems to be the difficulty, whether through its design or the altitude, in controlling the ball.

THE KNOWLEDGE

As yet none of Drogba, Eto'o, Fabiano, Gilardino, Ronaldo, Rooney or Torres has tested the goalkeeper.

PREVIEW

England seek swift respite

AFP, Cape Town

England are in a combative mood ahead of their must-win World Cup encounter with Algeria on Friday, with the return of Gareth Barry a boost to their confidence.

Fabio Capello's superstar team go into the Group C game in Cape Town under far more pressure than they would want after Robert Green's howler gifted the United States a point in their opening match.

Whether the West Ham goalkeeper retains his place remains to be seen, with David James and Joe Hart gnashing at the bit in the wings.

Capello is definitely without Ledley King who has a groin strain, meaning Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher is expected to start alongside John Terry, although Matthew Upson is another option.

In a boost, Barry will play after an ankle injury kept him out of their opener, which would allow captain Steven Gerrard to return to a more



offensive role

"Gareth will play this Friday," Capello told BBC radio. "He is okay, there is no problem. He has trained very well and he is fit."

The team has also been lifted with star striker Wayne Rooney and Chelsea left-back Ashley Cole back in training after the duo were restricted to gym and pool work following knocks in the opening game.

Having failed to find the

net in Germany four years ago, Rooney, who is set to partner Emile Heskey again, is still waiting for his first World Cup goal, but he denied he was under pressure.

"Not at all," he said. "We've got players in the team who can score goals. For us to do well, I need to play better than I did and to score goals."

"But I don't feel under extra pressure. If we win the next two games I'll be happy."

THE KNOWLEDGE

England last five goals at World Cup finals have been scored by midfielders.

England have kept 7 clean sheets in their last 9 World Cup games, conceding 2 in each of the other 2 games.

I'm not worried. If I don't score in the next game I'll just keep working until I do."

Algeria, who have never faced England before, know that they too must win, having crashed 1-0 to Slovenia in their opening game.

Their only injury doubt is goalkeeper Faouzi Chaouchi, who sprained his left knee in training on Tuesday.

Captain Anther Yahia believes his side can cause problems.

"We have qualities which should shine through," said the 28-year-old.

"We are going to pose problems for the English. We will be more ambitious (than against Slovenia) and it is a role that suits us better."

Rooney in bullish mood

AFP, Rustenburg

Wayne Rooney has insisted he would relish the prospect of coming up against Germany in the first knockout round at the World Cup.



WAYNE ROONEY

"Yes, I'd like to play Germany," Rooney said with a steely-eyed stare at the German reporter who had dared to suggest he might not welcome the prospect.

"It would be nice to beat them."

Germany are the only footballing superpower to put down a significant early marker here and Rooney believes this World Cup is up for grabs, a view supported by pre-tournament favourites Spain's shock defeat to Switzerland on Wednesday.

"Germany played really well against Australia, but there have not been any stand-out teams that I wouldn't like to meet," Rooney said. "It is wide open."

England will meet Germany in the first knockout round if they finish first and second in their groups, or vice versa.

Rooney says his confidence that England will improve on a disappointing 1-1 draw with the United States in their opening match in South Africa is shared by head coach Fabio Capello and the rest of the squad.

"The manager is obviously confident and I'm a confident person too," he said. "I believe we will qualify from this group."



PHOTO: AFP

US players jog ahead of a training session at the Pilditch Stadium on Wednesday. The Americans take on Slovenia today at 8.00pm in a must-win encounter.

PREVIEW

Battle in prospect

AFP, Johannesburg

Group C table-toppers Slovenia are going to have to battle to the last minute if they are to overcome the United States in Friday's World Cup clash and progress to the second round said US goalkeeper Tim Howard.

Slovenia are top of the group after an opening 1-0 triumph over Algeria while the USA held England to a 1-1 draw last Saturday.

A Slovenian victory over the Americans at Ellis Park will send them into the last 16 and Komac was in bullish mood on the eve of the game

when he declared: "We are going to win this match".

Howard, who has shaken off a rib injury from the England game to take his place in the US goal, said the Slovenian needs to back up his words.

"Talk is cheap," said the 31-year-old Everton goalkeeper. "He has got to stand toe-to-toe and they have got to stand toe-to-toe with us for 90 minutes. And if he's still standing, then I'll take my hat off to him."

The US squad are under no illusions they are playing for their World Cup survival and defeat is not an option.

"If we lose we're pretty much done," admitted Fulham forward Clint Dempsey, whose goal in the 1-1 draw against England has gone down in World Cup folklore after goalkeeper Robert Green's fumble.

US coach Bob Bradley was pleased at how his young team coped well with seven players making their first World Cup appearance and kept their focus despite falling behind to the goal from England.

"The mentality of the group is strong," Bradley said. Slovenia captain Robert Koren, who scored the winner against Algeria, says he is relishing the chance to take on the United States with a place in the knock-out phase at stake and has seen nothing to fear from the Americans.

"Both teams put in a lot of energy but there were a lot of mistakes," said the 29-year-old, who was released by newly-promoted Premier League side West Brom recently but has attracted interest from Serie A outfit Chievo.

"We saw good things and bad things and our coaching staff will try to get as much information out of that as possible."

VUVU-ANTHEM

It's official: vuvuzelas can be put to more creative use. A young man used his, along with a whistle, to deliver an impressive performance of the South African national anthem, Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika (God Bless Africa) outside Durban stadium. He played the song on his whistle, which was attached to the mouth of the vuvuzela and used this as an amplifier. Surprisingly enough, the otherwise monotonous sound of the vuvuzela delivered an impressive performance of the anthem, at least until the high notes at the end

SHU-SHU-ZELAS

The vuvuzelas are loud, and not everyone finds them pleasant or even bearable. But blocking out their noise need not be a sign that you do not adapt to South African culture: wearing ear-plugs could sound offensive, but how about wearing "shu-shu-zelas"? You can get the new South African football stadium accessory on Durban's beachfront promenade, for 10 rand (1.30 dollars) a pair.

DONATION NIGHTMARE

Germany coach Joachim Loew is asking for donations to fund the restoration of the cathedral tower in his home town of Freiburg, but he is causing a nightmare for a local family. The SMS message number given in the ad is identical with the telephone number of a Freiburg family which is now getting bombarded with well-intended messages around the clock as each SMS activates a donation of five euros. Local officials said that an answer machine is the only practical solution for the problem at the moment.



LOEW

NOWORLD CUP

Wimbledon ticket holders can forget about watching the World Cup in-between matches as the world's most famous tennis event starting Monday will be a rare World-Cup free oasis. A spokesman has confirmed that no football games from South Africa will be broadcast on the big screens on the compound this time around. The All England Club has also banned flags and vuvuzelas from its premises.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

After weeks of being woken before dawn by the bleating of vuvuzelas, people in Johannesburg got a few extra winks Wednesday night as South Africa's 3-0

defeat by Uruguay stunned the trumpet-tooters into silence. The vuvuzelas were flying at half-mast Thursday as the country mourned a result that sets South Africa up to make history - by becoming the first World Cup hosts to get knocked out in the first round.

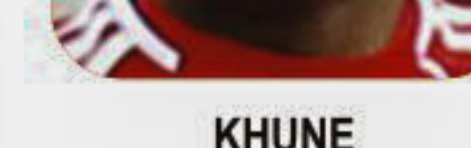
KHUNETHESECOND

With his side already trailing to a first-half Diego Forlan goal, Khune tripped Suarez in the 76th minute with the goal gaping. Swiss referee Massimo Busacca immediately brandished a red card, meaning Khune joins Gianluca Pagliuca of Italy, who was sent off in the Azzurri's 1-0 win against Norway at the 1994 World Cup. Forlan scored the subsequent spot-kick against substitute goalkeeper Moneeb Josephs. Alvaro headed in a third in added time.

NIGERIA FUMING IN DARK

Nigeria were left fuming after they were thrown into darkness by power cuts at their hotel in Bloemfontein ahead of a decisive World Cup Group B match on Thursday against Greece.

According to Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) spokesman Ademola Olajire, an official complaint has been lodged with world football governing body FIFA over the frequent power outage at their officially appointed Bloem Spa Lodge, a hillside facility far removed from the city. "The facilities at the hotel are outdated and should the problems persist, the team may have no choice than to



KHUNE

modation," Olajire said.

There were no obvious complaints when the team arrived Wednesday night as players and officials focused on the must-win match against Greece. But when they returned to the hotel from training at the Free State Stadium, the power went off and it took some time to start the power-generating set. Even then, the power-generating set failed to function properly and kept going off every other minute, causing unease in the team. Itumeleng Khune had the dubious distinction of becoming only the second goalkeeper in history to be sent off at a World Cup final when he saw a straight red Wednesday for a tackle on Luis Suarez in South Africa's 3-0 defeat to Uruguay.



2002 for all football fanatics out there

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