



Learn it from Diego

REUTERS, Pretoria

Nobody in Argentina's World Cup camp, not even Lionel Messi, takes a better free-kick than Diego Maradona.

When he organises a hit-the-crossbar competition, it only lasts a few seconds because he bounces the ball off the target first time then walks away laughing.

Maradona is a hands on coach, almost inside his players' minds, encouraging and cajoling during training.

He has thrived at the World Cup, first as player now as coach, his past of drug abuse and near death apparently well behind him.

The 49-year-old was the main man putting reserve goalkeepers Mariano Andujar and Diego Pozo through intense practice at free-kicks while the players involved in Thursday's 4-1 win over South Korea in their second Group B match rested.

A wide-eyed press corps watched as Maradona, who has a limp in his left leg, delivered sweetly weighted left-footed shots to either top corner.

Even an ordinary save was met with loud praise from the 1986 World Cup-winning captain.

Maradona talks of his 23 "wild cats" fighting to get on the pitch at the World Cup. Watching training, it is obvious they are not empty words. He keeps all 23, even third keeper Pozo, on their toes.

The constant "good, well done, more" that brought criticism during the qualifiers because

it seemed that was all he was good at, is a small part of his powers of motivation.

However much an Argentine player might lift his game in the light blue and white stripes, his confidence levels appear to peak when he is being encouraged and advised by Maradona.

Daniel Arcucci, co-writer of Maradona's autobiography "Yo, el Diego" (I, Diego), aptly headlined a recent article in La Nacion: "In his own way, Maradona is playing".

In the post-match news conference at Soccer City after Argentina topped the group with six points, Maradona said: "My show of affection towards my players is my way of thanking them for the job done."

"We've made a sensational group... if one has to say something, they say it. We're constantly having meetings."

"We talk things through and reach agreements. We believe that to come to a consensus is better than to punish, than a fine. Talking we resolve matters."

Captain Javier Mascherano told reporters on Friday: "Diego comes to embrace us but just as he does so in front of the cameras he's the same when there are no cameras and that's what's important."

An Argentina set-up full of internal squabbles may have been a correct interpretation of the state of affairs during the qualifiers when Maradona's team flirted with failure.

Harmony now appears to be carrying Argentina on a wave of success and the young -- and spoilt according to his mother Celia -- Messi is thriving.



PHOTO: AFP
KIWIS BEWARE: (L-R) Italy's Antonio Di Natale, Mauro Camoranesi, Christian Maggio, Simone Pepe, Domenico Criscito and Riccardo Montolivo run ahead of a training session at Irene's Southdown College in Pretoria yesterday, on the eve of their Group F match against New Zealand in Neilspruit.

PREVIEW

Win to get through

AFP, Bloemfontein

Paraguay head into their clash with Slovakia in Bloemfontein on Sunday knowing a win would take them to the brink of qualification for the second round.

All the teams in Group F are currently level-pegging but the South American side have their toughest game out of the way -- at least on paper -- with a 1-1 draw against defending world champions Italy in their Cape Town opener.

from the Italy game had given the team a confidence boost but said Paraguay needed to "improve on our possession and how we move the ball."

The South Americans are in their fourth straight finals with much of the credit given to Martino, who has managed to negotiate a delicate transition phase for his team but they have never progressed beyond the second round.

Paraguay have a strong set of strikers, with Martino opting to pair Argentina-born Lucas

City bar in January. He survived, but is on a long road to recovery.

While Paraguay also let a lead slip in their opener, the late goal conceded by Slovakia meant their draw against New Zealand felt like a defeat and they missed out on establishing a crucial early advantage in the group.

Head coach Vladimir Weiss described the equaliser to Robert Vittek's opener as a "small sporting tragedy for us."

Vitek said: "We've got no excuses for conceding a goal like that in the 93rd minute of a match as important as a World Cup group match, because things like that can decide our future."

"We needed the three points, we've just got one but it feels like we got none," he added.

Napoli midfielder Marek Hamsik is the main dangerman for Slovakia with other threats coming from striker Stanislav Sestak, who plays for Bundesliga club VfL Bochum, and Miroslav Stoch, a winger who has just been sold by Chelsea to Turkish giants Fenerbahce after a successful season on loan at Dutch champions FC Twente.

Slovakia are appearing for the first time in the World Cup finals, previously involved as part of the former Czechoslovakia.



While Slovakia also picked up a point, in Rustenburg, the eastern European outfit were shell-shocked after conceding a last-gasp equaliser against group outsiders New Zealand.

The South Americans came into the tournament in great shape after beating Brazil and Argentina in qualifying and will fancy their chances of reaching the last 16 after holding the group favourites.

Argentinian coach Gerardo Martino said taking a point

Barrios and his Borussia Dortmund teammate Nelson Valdez for the Italy clash while Roque Santa Cruz of Manchester City came on as a second-half substitute.

Their tight and effective defensive unit is marshalled by goalkeeper Justo Villar.

The South Americans are dedicating their games to Salvador Cabanas, the 2007 South American footballer of the year who was shot in the head in the toilet of a Mexico

THE KNOWLEDGE
Football was first introduced in Paraguay by a Dutchman named William Paats in 1888.
Slovak striker Robert Vittek is their most capped international player (75).

PREVIEW

All Whites warn Azzurri

AFP, Johannesburg

The Italians proclaim defeat is unthinkable but the New Zealand All Whites are planning to give the defending champions a run for their money at the World Cup on Sunday.

On face value, Italy, among the aristocrats of world football with four World Cups, are unbackable favourites to put the Oceania minnows in their place in Neilspruit and step up their title defence.

Both teams kicked off Group F with 1-1 draws -- the Azzurri struggled and needed a Daniele de Rossi second-half equaliser against Paraguay in Cape Town.

Meanwhile, New Zealand celebrated their first-ever World Cup point with a stoppage-time leveller with Slovakia in Rustenburg.

Italy, number five in the world, up against the 78th-ranked Kiwis looks a mismatch, but Italy have a history of inglorious defeats, losing 1-0 to North Korea in 1966 and 2-1 to South Korea in 2002.

"There are teams that we should beat, we're better. We need to play our game and of

course be careful," De Rossi said.

"They have big players so we won't be playing the ball in the air. But we're Italy and we should win."

"Not getting out of the group would be an absolute failure, it would also be a failure to not get past the second round."

New Zealand, for their part, are talking up their muscular approach, aiming to unhinge the lavishly-paid professionals of Serie A and etching their name into World Cup folklore.

"We're a big solid team and that's what we've designed ourselves around," defender Ben Sigmund said.

"With us Kiwis, we've always been that. The English style comes in with all the imports that have come out to New Zealand, so we've built that style. It's a great thing to have and I think a lot of other teams are scared."

There will be little subtlety in the All Whites' approach as they aim to play to their aerial strength.

Sigmund said New Zealand

won't hesitate to whack the ball long to central striker Rory Fallon and feed off his height.

Rory Fallon is about seven foot tall when he jumps and he's got a couple of good elbows on him as well, which I wouldn't want to get in the way of," Sigmund said.

De Rossi said he doesn't want Sunday's game to become a purely physical battle.

"I like the manly game but I also like playing the ball around. But I don't like it when the game gets too physical, not because I'm afraid but because I like the beautiful game," he said.

"But I haven't seen any really physical battles in the World Cup, they've all been good games and I think this one will be similar to the Paraguay game."

The Italians will remember their only encounter with New Zealand in a friendly ahead of the Confederations

Cup last year in South Africa when they won 4-3.

The All Whites led the match on three occasions through goals from Shane Smeltz and Chris Killie before Italy clawed back to win.

Italy will be without their talisman goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, who suffered a recurrence of a herniated disc against Paraguay and is unlikely to play again at the World Cup, giving way to Cagliari's Federico Marchetti.

New Zealand are dreaming of stunning the football world and reaching the round of 16 after the euphoria of their last-gasp equaliser by defender Winston Reid against Slovakia.

"It's still a long way to go. The immediate focus is the next game -- Italy," coach Ricki Herbert said.

"But it is possible, we just got to keep working hard and believing in ourselves and see what happens."

"We will keep on dreaming -- the reality is we have a chance like anybody else. It will be tough but we are competitors and right up there."



THE KNOWLEDGE
The last time these two sides met, it was a friendly and Italy won 4-3 in Pretoria.

Press fleece 'woeful' Three Lions

AFP, London

British newspapers were scathing Saturday about England's lacklustre performance in the 0-0 World Cup draw with Algeria, with striker Wayne Rooney's form causing particular concern.

Italian manager Fabio Capello was also facing some awkward questions after the embarrassing draw, which came hot on the heels of another draw, 1-1 with the United States.

"What a load of Roobish!" said the Daily Mirror, while the Guardian's verdict was: "No spark, no spirit, no hope".

"There can be no excuses, this was as bad as it gets," said the Sun, which had little sympathy for Rooney's complaint about being booed off the pitch by fans at the end of the match.

"Drab, dreary, depressing, disjointed, at times desperate and, overall, dull as ditchwater. Thanks England. No wonder you were booed off the pitch by your own fans last night," the tabloid added. "Woeful England at point of no return" was the headline in The Times.

"haunted by the fear that they will fail to meet" the expectations of a nation which has not won the World Cup since 1966.

"Certainly the pressure seemed to get to Wayne Rooney," the paper said. "Rooney's struggles warrant serious investigation."

It added: "There are times when playing for England must feel like a dream for Lampard, Gerrard and the rest of them but there are times... when it seems to be more like a nightmare."

The Daily Telegraph said Capello desperately needs to shake up his team to get the best out of players like Frank

Lampard and a "dispirited" Rooney before the final group C game with Slovenia.

"The sooner Capello pushes Steven Gerrard up behind a front-running Rooney, the quicker England can shake off the shackles of anxiety," the paper said.

"Cape Clowns" was the Daily Mirror's verdict on the match in Cape Town.

"The reign of Fabio Capello which has promised so much for so long came close to ending in ignominy and shame last night," it said.

"Just when it mattered most, this England team appears to have stopped responding to him."

PHILIPS
sense and simplicity

TRANSCOM ELECTRONICS

MALIAN REF FACING PROBE

Malian referee Koman Coulibaly, the subject of vicious attacks in the US media after disallowing a late goal by USA in their 2-2 draw with Slovenia, could be asked to face FIFA's refereeing committee to explain his decision.

A FIFA source told a US newspaper that Coulibaly could be asked to clarify the reasons for his disallowing the 86th-minute Maurice Edu goal even though there was general confusion for the reasons behind his decision.

USA forward Landon Donovan said: "We asked the ref many times what it was or who it was on and he wouldn't or couldn't explain it. I don't know what to think of the call because I didn't see any foul, just a normal free kick and a goal."

After the group stage, FIFA assess the performances of all officials and decide which ones to retain for the knockout stage of the tournament.

"If [Coulibaly] is found to have made a serious mistake, especially one that affected the outcome, then he would be highly unlikely to play any further part in the tournament," an unnamed source said.

"FIFA is determined to keep refereeing standards high and does not want high-profile mistakes."

ANELKA'S TIRADE AT DOMENECH

France and Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka unleashed a volley of insults at coach Raymond Domenech after being criticised at half-time of the 2-0 World Cup defeat to Mexico, L'Equipe newspaper reported on Saturday.

Anelka told Domenech to "go screw yourself, dirty son of a whore" in the dressing room at the Peter Mokaba Stadium in Polokwane after the coach took issue with his first-half performance, the report said.

The tirade was sparked after Domenech told Anelka to stop straying out of position in a match where the striker was one of France's worst performers, L'Equipe said, without citing its source.

When Anelka took issue with the criticism, Domenech threatened to substitute him, and the player made his foul-mouthed outburst.

Domenech's response was immediate. "OK. You're coming off," the coach said, according to the report, and he replaced him with Andre-Pierre Gignac for the second half.

But Mexico secured victory with two second-half goals, leaving France -- the beaten finalists four years ago -- staring elimination in the face.

If their Group A rivals Uruguay and Mexico draw in their match on Tuesday, the French are out of the tournament, regardless of their own result

against host nation South Africa.

The reported bust-up comes amid a dreadful World Cup for France, whose training camp has reportedly been driven with disputes between Domenech and his players.

LIPPI BLASTS MISFIRING STRIKERS

Italy coach Marcello Lippi is preparing to switch to a 4-4-2 formation in search of goals after launching a training ground tirade on his impotent strikers.

As the team continues preparations for their Group F clash with spritely New Zealand on Sunday, reports claim an exasperated Lippi stopped a training drill, slammed down a ball and shouted at his forwards.

He was heard to shout: "If you don't ever attack the shooting area you're never going to score. When your teammate has the ball you can't wait around watching him. You've got to keep attacking or you're never going to find the goal."

The reigning world champions have struggled to score in recent matches and Vincenzo Iaquinta looks set for the chopping block after failing to impress in a playmaking role in Lippi's 4-2-3-1 shape in the 1-1 draw against Paraguay.

Without the injured Andrea Pirlo setting up attacks with his accurate passing from deeper in midfield until the final group match against Slovakia, Lippi is set to double his strikeforce in search of goals against New Zealand by introducing Antonio Di Natale alongside Alberto Gilardino up front.

VUVUZELAS UNWELCOMED AT WIMBLEDON

Enthusiastic tennis fans will not be allowed to shatter the traditional tranquillity of the All England Club with vuvuzelas, despite the popularity of the plastic horn at the World Cup this year.

Wimbledon security has been told to confiscate -- in the politest possible way -- any of the South African noise-makers at the gates when the championships start on Monday.

"We won't be having the vuvuzelas," All England Club chief executive Ian Ritchie told Reuters in his elegant wood-panelled office overlooking the pristine grass courts.

"Half a dozen people with those things on Henman Hill and the entire grounds would hear them. So they are not suitable for us and we will be stopping them coming."



ANELKA



LIPPI