



Mexicans seeking revenge

PREVIEW

AFP, Johannesburg

Mexico will be looking to avenge their defeat at the 2006 World Cup finals when they take on two-time winners Argentina on Sunday for a place in the World Cup quarterfinals.

Four years ago in Germany, the teams met at the same Round of 16 stage and a stunning extra time goal by Maxi Rodriguez sealed a 1-0 win for Argentina, who later went out to hosts Germany in the quarter-finals.

Argentina and Mexico meet again at Soccer City on Sunday and Mexican

midfielder Gerardo Torrado insists his team will "play to the death" to beat their illustrious opponents, coached by Diego Maradona.

In previous encounters, Argentina have 11 wins compared to Mexico's four with ten games drawn and Javier Aguirre's Mexico side will need to pull something special out of the bag to create an upset.

Mexico's chances hinge on whether they can close off the supply to Argentinian dangerman Lionel Messi, the world footballer of the year, according to his Barcelona teammate Rafael Marquez.

"I know him (Messi) pretty well - he is tough to play against and to stop. We have to



WHERE'S HE GOING? Argentina coach Diego Maradona jumps over a barrier to embrace former Napoli teammate Salvatore Bagni during a press conference at the Loftus Versfeld Stadium in Pretoria yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



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try to close down the space in which he operates as it is difficult to get the ball off him," said Marquez.

"He is the best player in the world. He is very gifted on the ball and he can change the rhythm of a game at will.

"We have to close down the space and cut off the supply so he gets to see less of the ball."

"We are hoping to turn in the perfect match" added the 31-year-old Marquez, who hopes that the Mexican fans will get behind the side - though he fears many feel Argentina will prove a bridge too far.

Argentina struggled with an unconvincing qualification campaign for this World Cup, but since their arrival in South Africa have looked impressive and three wins in Group B have put them amongst the favourites for the title.

But the 31-year-old Mexican captain Torrado says his side will set out to claim the prized scalp of Maradona's side.

"We have an encounter ahead which we have to enjoy, but we will play to the death to win it," he said on FIFA.com.

"In this game (against Argentina) we have to continue advancing and to follow our dream so we will not lack attitude.

"We must play aggressively and look to put their goal-

keeper under pressure."

Mexico are hopeful 21-year-old Arsenal striker Carlos Vela will be fit for the match as he returns to training after a hamstring injury having missed the 1-0 defeat to Uruguay in their last Group A game.

Argentina's attacking prowess is without question, especially as Gonzalo Higuain scored a hat-trick against South Korea, but they are more susceptible at the back.

The Mexicans will need all the front-line firepower they can get and Vela returned to training with the squad on Thursday.

While Argentina have swept Nigeria, South Korea and Greece aside to make the last 16, their talisman Lionel Messi is going through something of a goal-drought though the Barcelona ace is creating chances.

"I'm not worried about it - obviously I'd prefer them to go in, but it's not a big deal," he said.

"What's important is that we keep playing well and that the team wins. With a bit of luck, I'll score against Mexico."

The winners of the match will play either England or Germany, who also play on Sunday.

Samuel rested

AFP, Pretoria

Argentina coach Diego Maradona on Saturday revealed that Inter Milan centre-back Walter Samuel is almost certain to miss Sunday's second round clash against Mexico.

Samuel has a hamstring problem and will likely be replaced by club team-mate Nicolas Burdisso, who will play alongside Bayer Munich's Martin Demichelis.

Speaking at the official pre-match press conference at the Loftus Versfeld stadium here, Maradona said he would unlikely risk Samuel.

"He felt good at the beginning of training but then we had some doubts. I have some doubts and he may harbour some doubts as well," said the World Cup winning captain from 1986.

"I will field the player who is in the better condition to play, probably Nicolas, we don't want to risk anyone.

"In this match, when you get long balls, you need someone who can run fast, we can't afford to be giving away chances.

"We have to be 100 per cent in top shape and if he (Samuel) can't perform that way, we need him to work for all his team-mates."

Group stage a slow burner

REUTERS, Cape Town

It was something of a slow burn but when the group stage of the World Cup eventually caught fire it blazed with dazzling and memorable intensity.

Stunning upsets, including the unprecedented exit of both 2006 finalists, deserved progress from some lively outsiders, mouthwatering head-to-heads, goalkeeping howlers and a sumptuous seven-goal exhibition together produced a compelling two weeks.

There have been disappointments too as Africa, with the notable exception of Ghana, failed hopelessly to deliver at their continent's first World Cup with South Africa becoming the first host nation not to reach the second phase.

They had high hopes after coming back well to earn a 1-1 draw with Mexico in an exciting opener but, along with several other teams, the hosts will rue their safety-first approach which backfired in a calamitous 3-0 defeat by Uruguay.

Several sides went into their first fixture so transfixed by avoiding defeat that they forgot about trying to win.

For the likes of Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Greece and Serbia those should have been the games they targeted but short-term thinking cost them dear and out they eventually tumbled.

Italy and France were a different case, their poor starts more the product of ragged play rather than lack of ambition.

France's remarkable on and off-pitch implosion will be one of the lasting memories of the tournament.

Feeble in their opening goalless draw with Uruguay, outplayed in defeat by Mexico and mentally

destroyed before South Africa put the final nail in their coffin, the French went home in utter disgrace.

Italy, a creaking shadow of the 2006 champions, were not much better, although they at least battled until the very end.

They were sterile in a draw with Paraguay, exposed as woefully short of ideas when held by New Zealand and outclassed in their stunning 3-2 defeat by Slovakia.

Key figures from the 1st phase



The holders and runners-up both went out after finishing last in what appeared fairly mundane groups. The only consolation for their coaches, Marcello Lippi and Raymond Domenech, was that they had already announced they were leaving.

Other big guns also struggled as European champions Spain were undone by Switzerland before recovering with expected wins over Honduras and Chile while England scraped through.

For all the talk of a winter World Cup aiding the European teams, only the Netherlands, through with a 100 percent record, and Portugal looked as though they could be a real threat.

South America dominated but it was not just Brazil and Argentina who impressed this time as Uruguay and Paraguay both topped tough-looking groups while Chile managed to get through as runners-up after winning their first two matches.

Joining them in the last 16 are the likes of Slovakia, the United States, Japan and South Korea, all of whom deserved to advance with spirited displays and a real commitment to attack.

Perhaps, after all, there are indeed no easy games in international football.

Slovakia's win over Italy, particularly the thunderous last 20 minutes, will probably be remembered as the match of the round but others deserve an honourable mention.

Australia and Serbia were like two heavyweight boxers late in the 12th round as they hammered away at each other in an intense end-to-end scrap that ended with a double knockout -- both teams being eliminated.

North Korea might have been thrashed 7-0 by on-song Portugal but they should remember how they had Brazil briefly quaking at the end of their 2-1 defeat, while New Zealand deserve huge credit for going home unbeaten by Italy, Paraguay and Slovakia.

Pele's famous prediction that an African team would win the World Cup before the end of the century was meant to relate to the 20th but even a 21st-century success is probably a long-shot after yet another disappointing show.

Despite an unprecedented six-team presence the Africans, with in-fighting again a problem, were almost universally outclassed, with Ghana left to fly the continental flag.

It has been dramatic, entertaining and uplifting but for all the splashing by the little fish in the shallows, the sharks of Brazil, Argentina and Germany, with 10 world titles between them, are still circling menacingly in the deep.

INTERNET

Vicente Del Bosque won't admit it but he must be secretly wondering where Spain's goals will come from in South Africa if anything happens to David Villa.

The 28-year-old striker got La Roja's World Cup campaign back on track following the opening loss to Switzerland with a brace against Honduras and was once again the spark Friday as he set Spain on the road to a 2-1 victory over Chile with the opening goal in Pretoria.

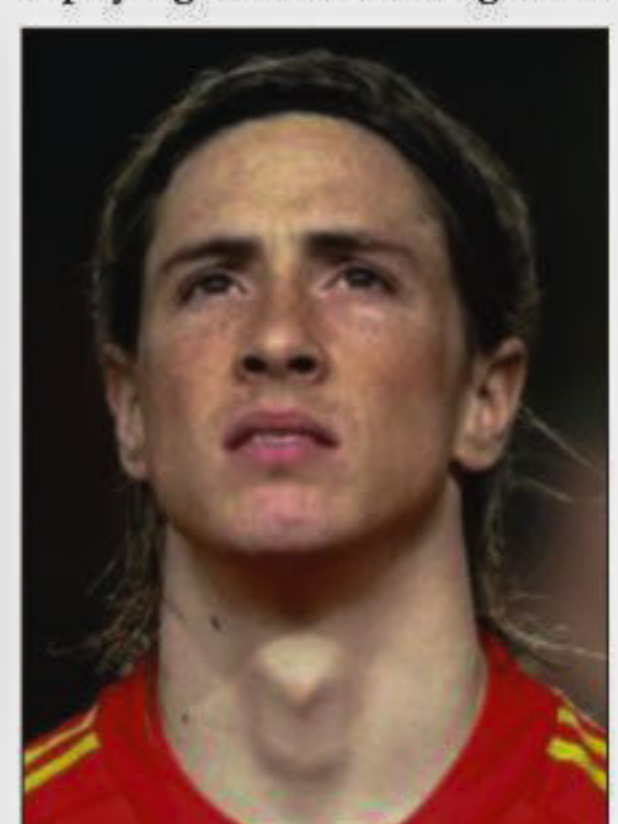
If his current form continues, the man Barcelona paid 40 million euros (49 million dollars) for remains well on target to achieve his pre-tournament goal of finishing as the World Cup's top scorer.

Villa is now level with Argentina's Gonzalo Higuain and Robert Vittek of Slovakia in the race for the Golden Boot and, not surprisingly, is the bookies' favourite to open the scoring in Tuesday's intriguing Round of 16 clash with Portugal in Cape Town.

But while Spain also have

scoring options from midfield, as seen with Andres Iniesta's strike against Chile, Del Bosque is too heavily reliant on Villa.

The 59-year-old needs Fernando Torres to start finally repaying the unstinting faith



TORRES

he has shown in the striker since taking over from Luis Aragones following Spain's Euro 2008 victory.

Aragones used Torres alongside Villa in all of Spain's important games in Austria and Switzerland, but the

Liverpool striker was regularly outshone by his more prolific partner, a pattern that has continued ever since.

Torres went into Friday's game at Loftus Versfeld having scored just once at international level since helping Spain clinch the title in Vienna against Germany almost two years ago.

And in only his second start for La Roja since undergoing surgery on his right knee in April, Torres continued his miserly run of form in the national jersey and was replaced by Cesc Fabregas shortly before the hour-mark.

However, just like he did after hauling a misfiring Torres off against Honduras in the previous game, Del Bosque defended his striker, saying his is slowly playing his way back to fitness and form.

But how much longer can Del Bosque keep faith with a player who simply doesn't look like finding the form needed to not only repay his coach's faith in him but also to spur Spain on to a first ever World Cup win?

Torres' solitary strike at international level since Spain's Euro triumph came in the 6-0 World Cup warm-up defeat of Poland earlier this month in the striker's return from his mid-April knee surgery.

It's only hair

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Bleached beards, "city boy" crops and headbands at the World Cup in South Africa have replaced the shaggy manes and bushy moustaches of soccer days past.

Players' hairdos are a perennial talking point at soccer's biggest spectacle and players face razor-sharp scrutiny -- right down to their shaving routines.

Brazil's Robinho has been sporting a new-look beard at the tournament and bloggers back home have launched an online campaign urging the baby-faced forward to visit the barber's.

"Ugly face, beautiful game -- God willing," Robinho, 26, told reporters last week, laughing off suggestions he grew the beard in a bid to frighten opponents. "I just forgot to shave," he said.

Meanwhile, at the camp of South American rivals Argentina, the new greying beard worn by Diego Maradona is being seen as a symbol of a more serene, mature air in the squad that seems to be bearing fruit on the pitch.

Maradona, nicknamed El Pelusa (Fuzzy) for the voluminous hairdo of his 1980s playing heyday, grew the beard because he could not shave after his pet dog bit him in the face, but it looks like becoming a permanent fixture.

As far as footballers' haircuts go, award-winning British hairdresser Mark Woolley said they have got more conservative and sophisticated of late.

has become one of the sport's leading style icons and Spain's Fernando Torres recently chopped off his highlighted locks, opting for a discreet crop.

"There's been a definite move towards the tailored city boy look, which is great for the sport," Woolley told Reuters.

But not all the game's protagonists seem ready to look like office workers.

France's tattooed marksman Djibril Cisse raised eyebrows in South Africa with his trademark bleached beard, a trend also embraced by veteran Cameroon defender Rigobert Song, who teamed it with lion's mane dreadlocks.

The blond mini-mohawk made popular by England's David Beckham got a twist at the hands of Swiss midfielder Valon Behrami, while firm devotees of long hair like Uruguay's Diego Forlan have been taming their

manes with Alice bands.

Aesthetics aside, footballers' hair is sometimes motivated more by superstition than fashion. The entire Romanian squad dyed their hair blond as a lucky charm at the 1998 World Cup and Spanish media have speculated that goalkeeper Iker Casillas shaved off his beard after the team's opening loss against Switzerland in a bid to reverse their fortunes.

So far it seems to be working. Spain won their two subsequent games to finish top of their group.



SONG



BEHRAMI

BLACKOUT

A five-hour power failure struck Bloemfontein's tourist information centre on Thursday, disrupting the computer booking service, local newspaper Volksblad reported. This meant hundreds of requests from Germany and England fans seeking accommodation were left unattended, the daily said. Around 30,000 fans are expected to stream into the city for Sunday's Round of 16 showdown between the two teams.

FEDERER'S ADVICE FOR ENGLAND

The biggest winner in tennis is happy to share some of the thinking that has kept him at the top for years with an English football team which could use some inspiration to stay alive at the World Cup in South Africa.

Wimbledon top seed Roger Federer was asked what advice he might give the national squad, which escaped the group stage of the football but now face mighty Germany in a knockout match Sunday in Bloemfontein.

Pressed in media after reaching the Wimbledon fourth round, the Swiss said: "The better the opponent is, the better you play yourself. It's very simple sometimes.

"There's nothing much you have to do. Against weaker players or weaker teams, you tend to have options. You tend to pick the wrong ones.

"Against the better players, you only have one option and then you play better. I think that's what's gonna happen with the England Germany match, as well."

CAPTAIN ZUMA

World Cup fans in Cape Town will have the chance to see a very special footballer next week - the South African president. Jacob Zuma will captain a team in the Unity Cup ahead of the quarter-final being played at the Green Point Stadium on July 3. The game is part of a project for handicapped children organized by a World Cup sponsor and the Special Olympics. FIFA president Joseph Blatter personally gave his blessing to the idea, the Star newspaper reported. Zuma was a keen footballer in his youth.

WRONG AGAIN?

According to arctic fox Lissy, Germany will lose against England on Sunday as she chose a dead chicken offered her for a morning meal under the English

flag, snubbing another chick under a German flag. What it should really mean, though, is that Germany are in the quarter-finals. The animal oracle at Chemnitz zoo got it wrong in all three previous Germany matches as porcupine Leon predicted an Australian victory over Germany, hippo Petty a German win over Serbia and monkey Anton a Ghana victory over Germany. In another oracle at a German aquarium, octopus Paul opted for meat placed under the German flag and not that of England, where he originally came from. Paul's track record is 3-0 so far.

PAY CUT FOR ANTIC

The coach of Serbia's national football team, Radomir Antic, will get a pay cut following Serbia's first-round exit from the World Cup in South Africa, Serbian newspapers reported Saturday.

"We have lost five million dollars by failing to advance to the Round of 16," said Serbian Football Association president Tomislav Karadzic in explaining the move.

Antic said he would decide whether or not to step down after a few days of rest. He took over as Serbia's coach in August 2008.

Karadzic said he had been certain that Serbia would advance to the Round of 16. But after having achieved "a historic victory over Germany," he remarked, "we experienced a fiasco."

Serbia could have gone through with a draw in their third and final Group D match but lost to Australia 2-1 and finished bottom of the group, which also included Ghana.



FEDERER



ANTIC

CLOSE SHAVE

Who shaves, loses! Some players in the Dutch team are taking those words literally and have decided not to shave during the World Cup. Rafael van der Vaart, Khalid Boulahrouz and Nigel de Jong started the fad and have since been joined by John Heitinga and Wesley Sneijder. The facial hair is growing day by day as the Dutch march on without having dropped a point so far. Only Boulahrouz has broken the pledge, arguing that the beard began to itch, so he decided to shave it off. As punishment he will have to bend down on the goal line during the next shooting practice while the players take aim at his backside.