

# Weiss feels no pressure

When your national press labels your progression from group stage to knock-out phase of the World Cup as a "miracle", it sums up the notion of a being a rank outsider in world football.

Slovakia go into Monday's second-round game against the Netherlands, on a run of seven wins and unbeaten in 22 games, as complete underdogs.

But underdogs who dispatched an admittedly under-par Italy, the defending champions, 3-2 in their final group game to make sure of their qualification.

They now come up against a Dutch side brimming with talent and household names, the likes of Arjen Robben, Wesley Sneijder, Robin van Persie, Mark van Bommel and Dirk Kuyt in their ranks.

The average punter could probably muster more names of players left on the Dutch bench than actually taking the pitch for Slovakia, whose football association was founded in 1993 after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

This is Slovakia's World Cup debut, made instantly memorable by their victory over the Italians.

"We didn't have anything to lose because no one expected us to beat Italy, they had all the pressure," said midfielder Miroslav Stoch, who plies his club trade with Turkish giants Fenerbahce.

"It will be similar against the Dutch because they have to win, they are expected to, and the pressure will be on them.

"Whereas we again will have nothing to lose. Nobody expected us to go through then and no one expects us to now."

Slovakia coach Vladimir Weiss acknowledged that his team would be up against opposition whose players are on the books of the world's leading clubs.

"The Dutch are a fantastic team," he said. "They have a lot of players who play in the best club teams in the world, and with good coaches. They are one of the favourites in the tournament but you never know. It is like when we played against Italy, we have a good spirit and we must impress."

He added: "The favourites are the Dutch, like the Italians were, but you never know. We'll see."

Crucial to Slovakia's play is 22-year-old captain Marek Hamsik, who moved to Serie A in 2004 and this season scored 12 goals for Napoli as they finished sixth to qualify for next season's Europa League.

"He's a world-class player," said Weiss. "He's always put in great performances wherever I've positioned him, and it's for all those reasons that I decided to make him captain."

Hamsik set up Robert Vittek for his two goals against Italy, a game in which Stoch never stopped harrying the Azzurri defence, while holding duo Jurak Kucka and Zdenko Strba stifled the Italian attack, and in-form goalkeeper Jan Mucha made a series of good saves.

Having failed to score in nine games during qualifying for the World Cup, Vittek has now hit three in three games in South Africa to jointly-lead the scoring charts.

"The Dutch are clear favourites but we will try to give them a hard time," said Vittek. "As newcomers we have nothing to lose."

Attacking midfielder Erik Jendrisek added: "We showed (against Italy) that we also know how to play attacking football."

"Italy were undoubtedly surprised by how we performed and what we were able to do. The difference between this match and our last two games was that as well as trying to play football, this time we did it with heart."



Netherlands' Wesley Sneijder (L) leads the likes of Arjen Robben (2nd from L), Giovanni van Bronckhorst (R) and Dirk Kuyt as they jog prior to a training session in Johannesburg yesterday, ahead of their Round of 16 game against Slovakia today.



USEFUL PRACTICE: Slovakia defender Martin Skrtel is about to head the ball during a training session at the Caledonian Stadium in Pretoria yesterday, ahead of today's Round of 16 match against Netherlands.

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## Dutch wary of Slovak spirit

**PREVIEW**

AFP, Durban

The Netherlands play surprise package Slovakia in a round of 16 match here on Monday, wary of a team spirit that saw the unheralded side beat defending World Cup champions Italy in the group stage.

The Dutch, two-time finalists in the 1974 and 1978 World Cups, were themselves unbeaten in the group phase, beating Denmark 2-0, Japan 1-0 and Cameroon 2-1.

World Cup debutants Slovakia drew 1-1 with New Zealand and lost 2-0 to group-winners Paraguay before trumping Italy 3-2 to spectacularly claim their runners-up spot.

"Slovakia will be tough," Dutch striker Robin van Persie warned. "They showed really good spirit and hung in there against Italy and it was a great result for their country."

"So far, it's looking good for us, but we can still improve on bits and pieces."

Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk added: "This is an opponent we must not underestimate. We cannot be nonchalant."

Although the Dutch notched up three group phase wins -- a feat matched only by Argentina, van Marwijk warned they could ill afford to let teams back into games through sloppy play, as was the case against Cameroon.

"That period of negligence we had, we cannot afford that again," he said. "It's a bit of a lesson for the next match."

Slovakian striker Robert Vittek, who scored two goals in his team's win over Italy, said that the game against the Azzurri had "really pushed the limits of Slovak football".

"Beforehand we couldn't have dreamt about this, I'm so happy, we showed everything that we're capable of in achieving this," he said.

"The Dutch are clear favourites but we will try to give them a hard time. As newcomers we have nothing to lose."

The Netherlands were boosted by the return against Cameroon of star winger Arjen Robben, who made his South African World Cup bow as a late substitute after missing their opening two matches with a hamstring injury.

If there were any lingering doubts over his injury, Robben erased them in emphatic style with a trademark contribution to the Netherlands' winning goal, slamming a shot against the post with Klaas-Jan Huntelaar burying the rebound.

"We made it clear at the start that we would be taking this tournament one challenge at a time, and now we will focus on Slovakia and Slovakia alone," said Robben. "I'm already looking forward to it."

The Bayern Munich player will likely come off the bench for a half.

The winner of the second round match at the Moses Mabhida Stadium here face a tough quarterfinal against the winner of the Brazil v Chile play-off.

**'No favours from dad'**

REUTERS, Pretoria

Slovakia midfielder Vladimir Weiss does not expect any favours from his uncompromising father for what could be the biggest game of his career in Monday's World Cup last 16 tie with Netherlands.

His dad and namesake is the Slovakia coach who dropped his son from the team that stunned holders Italy 3-2 in their highly-impressive final group game to qualify for the knockout stages against the odds.

Asked if he would be selected for the second round match, a glum Weiss junior said: "I don't know, managers usually don't change a winning team but we'll see."

"The team got changed a little bit (against Italy), everybody played 100 percent, there wasn't anybody making mistakes in the game," he told reporters after a sun-kissed training session before jetting to Durban for the match.

Zdeno Strba is suspended having been booked against Italy so there is one spot free in the team, while Jurak Kucka is a slight doubt having picked up a knock that has stopped him training for two days.

"We know one player can't play. We are all going to hope," Weiss added before explaining how much the mood had changed in the camp after a draw with New Zealand and defeat by Paraguay in their first two outings.

"Before the game against Italy everyone was very negative, one game can change a lot," he added.



**THE KNOWLEDGE**

Robert Vittek drew level with retired Szilard Nemeth as the country's all time top goalscorer (22) after two goals against Italy. He can overtake the mark with a goal against Netherlands.

# Hosts rejoice Ghana

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa rejoiced Sunday in Ghana's win over the United States, making them only the third African team to reach a World Cup quarterfinal and the continent's only flag left in the tournament.

"Black Stars flying high," The Sunday Times proclaimed over a picture of defender John Pantsil racing with Ghana's national flag after their 2-1 win.

Ghana shatter American dream," said The Sunday Independent, hailing the team for bringing Africa into the last eight of the first tournament held on the continent's soil.

"Even with the burden of carrying an entire continent, Ghana could not fail here last night," the paper said. "Throughout Africa, from Phokeng to Accra, celebrations reverberated from the final whistle and long into the evening."

Just moments after the game, South Africa's ruling African National Congress -- which began as the continent's first liberation movement -- hailed the victory, clearly relieved to see an African team progress after the hosts crashed out in the group stages.

"The ANC would like to thank the Ghana National Soccer Team (the Black Stars) for salvaging the image of the continent in this tournament," the party said in a statement.

"We are very confident that having gone this far, you are indeed heading for the 2010 FIFA World Cup finals on our soil. We are very proud of you, as South Africa and as part of the continent of Africa, you are our pride."

Despite Bafana Bafana's loss, South Africa is still revealing in its hosting of the World Cup, which has so far overcome worries about crime and poor public transport to stage an event without major incident.

With the tournament now focused on high-stakes

matches like England's clash with Germany on Sunday, host cities are gearing up for big influxes of fans.

The two European giants play in the normally sleepy city of Bloemfontein, where the airport is expecting 15 charter flights to land -- making it one of the busiest days in its history.

The long rivalry between English and German supporters has triggered some brutal episodes of hooligan violence.

When the teams played each other in the European championships a decade ago, riot police had to fire water cannon to bring order on the streets of the Belgian town of Charleroi.

Provincial police spokesman Sam Makhele said the night before the match was quiet, with no reports of trouble.

"We have increased our forces on the ground, around the stadium, around the mall and the entertainment area," he said.

"We have been meeting with police from both countries and they have advised us what to look for. They are going to be part of the deployment today, in uniforms and plain clothes," he told AFP.

"We are not anticipating any problems but if there are some, we will be ready."

**OBAMA TO SWAP SHIRT WITH ATTA**

US President Barack Obama will exchange soccer team shirts with Ghanaian President John Atta Mills next time they meet, the White House said Saturday as the teams squared off in the World Cup's second round.

Obama and Mills "reaffirm the strong ties between the people of our two countries, including our shared passion on the soccer field," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said in a statement.

The pair "have agreed that when they next meet they will exchange team jerseys in the spirit of camaraderie and sportsmanship that they look forward to seeing on the playing field," Gibbs said ahead of the round-of-16 knockout clash with Ghana in South Africa.

**'FIFA FAVOURS BIGGER NATIONS'**

Harry Kewell has risked the wrath of FIFA by criticising world football's governing body for failing clamp down on inconsistent refereeing that favours the bigger teams.

Kewell, who was shown a red card for handball against Ghana, has suggested that players from the smaller nations are being penalised more heavily at the World Cup than the bigger names.

"What are FIFA doing about it when teams like us are getting hammered and the bigger teams don't?" Kewell told Australian media on Sunday.

"We've been told to play the game fair and I think we do."

"Nothing against the bigger teams but they're allowed to do it because of who and what they are."

"We were told simulation should be a yellow card -- but where was the card?" he said. "I'm not having a go at him (Krasic), he tried to get a penalty for his team, but it went unpunished."

**KOREA PRESIDENT CHEERING FOR JAPAN**

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak hopes former colonial ruler Japan will fly the footballing flag for Asia after his own country was eliminated from the World Cup.

"I hope that Japan, on behalf of Asia, will advance to the quarterfinals with the eight strongest teams by beating Paraguay," Lee told Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan at a G8 summit in Canada, according to his office.

According to Japanese media reports, Kan thanked Lee for his support and said: "I will convey your message to the Japanese team."

**PRESIDENT'S PRAYERS ANSWERED**

The president of Ghana led his nation's soccer squad in prayers on Saturday shortly before they beat the United States 2-1 to reach the World Cup quarterfinals for the first time.

John Atta Mills spoke to the players in the dressing room, giving them a pep talk before they prayed together, Ghana Football Association vice-president Fred Pappoe told Reuters.

"It made a lot of difference to the boys," said Pappoe, who is also head of management for the Black Stars. "We always pray -- before a game, in the bus, in the hotel and also on the pitch before each half and afterwards, no matter what the result."

"But to have our president here and sitting in the stands next to (FIFA president) Sepp Blatter was a solid morale-booster for the team. When he came to the dressing room, to see the boys, and to pep them up, it meant a lot."

"He said some prayers with the team, a special word of prayer just before the game when they went on to the pitch and it made a difference."

Pappoe said the president's visit had helped calm the players' nerves. "They were, surprisingly, not nervous at all because they have faith in the coach and believe that if they play by the rules all will be fine," he said.

**CHADU-RI'S TEARS**

South Korea's Cha Du-ri, the son of one of Asia's finest players, broke down on the pitch when his team failed to qualify for the quarterfinals against Uruguay in what may be the defender's last World Cup.

The son of Cha Bum-kun, regarded as one of Asia's best players of all time, said the 2-1 defeat by Uruguay was devastating after they controlled much of the game in the second half.

"We were controlling the game, we had played a great second half and then to lose like this... that hurts twice as much," he told Reuters, with tears still welling up in his eyes.

"They had two world-class attackers, that paid off today. In football you also need some luck. That's what we were missing today," he said.

"We were so close, it's sad, makes you bitter," the 32-year-old said, trying to control his emotions.

"I'm not the youngest anymore either and who knows if I get to play in another World Cup. That makes it all the sadder."

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KEWELL

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