

Chasing a dream

AFP, Johannesburg
One-time football power Uruguay are on the verge of their first World Cup semifinal appearance in 40 years with African hope Ghana blocking their way at Soccer City here on Friday.

Before Brazil and Argentina, Uruguay were the dominant South American team winning two World Cups in 1930 and 1950, two Olympic Games gold medals and eight of their 14 Copa America titles. La Celeste's World Cup

THE KNOWLEDGE

All three of Diego Forlan's World Cup goals have come against African nations.

Asamoah Gyan is only the second African player to score four goals at the World Cup after Roger Milla (who scored five).

Uruguay are unbeaten in their last six World Cup games, keeping four clean sheets in the process.



The Ghana-Uruguay quarterfinal at the Soccer City stadium in Johannesburg today will see the key battle between Diego Forlan (L), the dangerous Uruguayan marksman, and Asamoah Gyan, who carries the hope of an entire continent.

fortunes have been in decline since their seismic 2-1 upset of Brazil in the 1950 final before 174,000 fans at the Maracana Stadium, Rio de Janeiro.

Uruguay reached the semi-finals in 1954 and 1970, but on Friday Oscar Tabarez's team get their chance to reach the last four after a break of four decades.

Ghana, with all of Africa behind them, are out to create history of their own, but Uruguay are surfing the wave of South American success at South Africa 2010.

They have won three of their four matches after an opening scoreless draw with France and in Luis Suarez and Diego Forlan Uruguay possess

two of the most potent forwards in the tournament, while the defence, marshalled by skipper Diego Lugano, has only conceded one goal.

Ajax striker Suarez's curling right-footer in the 80th minute of Saturday's last 16 match with South Korea earned Uruguay a last-eight spot, and also netted him the man of the match award.

Forlan hopes the strong South American presence in the quarterfinals will encourage FIFA to revisit their quota of finals places rather than force the fifth team in the regional qualifiers to play off against a Central American side.

Uruguay had to overcome Costa Rica to reach the finals.

"We have to show how strong South American football is and the strength of the qualifying programme. I hope in doing so we can have five places and not the current four-and-a-half for the next World Cup in Brazil," Forlan



said.

Tabarez has already finalised his team replacing defender Diego Godin and midfielder Alvaro Pereira with Mauricio Victorino and Alvaro Fernandez.

"Before we began this World Cup, we saw this great harmony among the players and I said to them, 'The people back home have aspirations, they have dreams and we have to deliver them'," Tabarez said.

"Our objective is to go as far as we can in this tournament."

Ghana are bidding to become the first African nation to reach the semifinals of the World Cup.

Ghana's 'Black Stars' are the lone flag-waver for Africa in the first World Cup staged on the continent and there is an emotional outpouring of support for them against Uruguay.

Ghana became only the third African team along with

Abedi Pele backs Black Stars

SOCCERNET

Ghana legend Abedi Pele has backed the Black Stars to beat Uruguay in Friday's World Cup quarter-final and ride the wave of continental support all the way to the final in Soccer City on July 11.

Pele, widely considered to be one of the greatest ever African players, is Ghana's all-time leading scorer and has an added interest in the finals in South Africa as his sons Ibrahim Ayew and Andre Ayew are competing for Milovan Rajevac's side.

"I am happy Dede (Andre) has done well," Pele said. "What is interesting is that I am still strong to see him play in a World Cup."

"It's been difficult at times, because when he steps on to the pitch, you don't know whether he is going to do well or not. So you can imagine the emotions."

"We have been doing some coaching on the phone. I also encourage Ibrahim to be patient so that, when his time comes, nothing can stop him."

And three-time African Footballer of the Year Pele insists that the Ayew brothers and their team-mates are not only capable of beating Uruguay, but could become the most successful African side in World Cup history by making it to the final in Johannesburg.

"I am very happy that we qualified for the quarterfinals. It's a huge improvement given that we got knocked out in the second round in the last World Cup. The whole of South Africa and Africa is behind us and we have no choice but to go further."

"Football is not mathematics. We are strong and so are Uruguay. The game can go either way. This gives us the confidence that we can go further. I see Ghana going all the way to the final."

Pele admitted that while he has been delighted with the Black Stars progress, the failure of any other African sides to qualify from the group stages is a huge disappointment.

Bastian fires warning

REUTERS, Erasmusia

Germany must beware of Argentina's attempts to provoke them during Saturday's World Cup quarterfinal, German midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger said on Wednesday.

Schweinsteiger said Argentine players would be looking to throw the Germans off their game and urged his teammates not to be drawn into any provocation.

"It starts before the match," Schweinsteiger, a member of the squad that beat Argentina on penalties four years ago to move into the semifinals of the 2006 World Cup, told reporters.

"If you see how they gesticulate, how they try to influence the referee. That is not part of the game. That is a lack of respect. They just are like that," said Schweinsteiger.

Several players and coaches from both teams clashed immediately after Germany's

victory on penalties in 2006 in an incident that briefly overshadowed the hosts' joy of advancing to the last four.

Germany and Argentina have also met twice in a World Cup final, with the former winning in 1990 and the latter coming out on top four years earlier.

"We should not be provoked by them," Schweinsteiger said.

"I hope the referee will pick up the feeling of who is provoking whom. We saw that again in their match against Mexico at halftime."

There was a heated exchange between the Argentina and Mexico benches at halftime of their last 16 match after Italian referee Roberto Rosetti let Argentina's first goal stand despite being clearly offside. Argentina won 3-1 to advance.

"This behaviour shows their character and mentality," Schweinsteiger said

'Ballboy' Mueller prefers to wait

AFP, Erasmusia

Diego Maradona thought Thomas Mueller was a ballboy when they first met, a demeaning snub which has fired-up the German star to plot Argentina's downfall in Saturday's World Cup quarterfinal.

The 20-year-old Bayern Munich midfielder scored twice in Germany's 4-1 hammering of England last Sunday and is a contender for the tournament's best young player.

But he was virtually unknown outside of Germany when he made his debut in a 1-0 friendly defeat to Argentina in Munich in March and attended the post-match press conference as his country's great new hope alongside the Argentina coach.

Maradona joked he thought the ballboy had arrived and felt so slighted that he stormed off and refused to return until the German left the stage to him alone.

But with three goals at this World Cup already and a Champions League final appearance, plus the German league and cup double, under his belt, Mueller is now a household name and sure to cause Argentina problems in Cape Town on Saturday.

"Now I have won two titles and played in the Champions League with Bayern, so a few things have changed," said Mueller.

He is too young to remember Maradona as a player, but he saw the midfield maestro play in former Germany captain Lothar Matthaus' testimonial game in 2000 and was greatly impressed.

"He was overweight at that time but what he did with the ball was amazing, something I have rarely seen," he said.

"As a coach I can't judge him but the results and the convincing way Argentina are playing means he is doing things right."

When Germany last played Argentina in the World Cup quarterfinals at Berlin's Olympic Stadium four years ago, Mueller watched the game with friends on a giant screen in Munich and well remembers the 4-2 penalty shoot-out win.

"I remember us winning through sheer willpower and I haven't forgotten the scenes after," he said, referring to the skirmishes between players from both teams on the pitch after Germany's Jens Lehmann saved the final penalty.

"We mustn't be provoked," warned Mueller ahead of this weekend's clash in Cape Town, before joking: "I won't mind a fight afterwards if we have won."

Kimberley behind Uruguayans

REUTERS, Kimberley

When the Uruguayan squad left their hotel in Kimberley to head for the World Cup quarterfinal with Ghana in Johannesburg, staff and guards at the gate bid them farewell singing "Shosholoz'a".

It is an old South African rail-gang song that has been adopted by soccer and rugby fans and urges: "Go Forward, Go Forward". The gesture was all the more poignant as not only did Uruguay trounce hosts South Africa earlier in the tournament but they take on the sole surviving African side in Friday's match.

A small group of Kimberley residents waved farewell to the Uruguayans from across the road as the bus left the hotel on Wednesday evening for the airport, the players clutching flasks of traditional "matte" tea.

The mining city and the squad have clearly bonded. Charmaine Visser, manager of the Victorian Guest House, was wearing a sky-blue Uruguay scarf given to her by coach Tabarez when they met.

Hair salon owner Philinda Golden said she had trimmed Forlan's blond locks during his stay.

"The country is supporting Ghana, because they are African, but in this city, everyone is for Uruguay," Philinda said.