



High pass marks

AFP, Johannesburg

European champions Spain's return to the form in the 1-0 win over Portugal in their World Cup last 16 match showed that pass masters Xavi and Andres Iniesta were fully back in tandem.

And that is an ominous sign for not only Saturday's quarterfinal opponents Paraguay but for any of the other six World Cup contenders left in the competition.

The Barcelona duo -- pocket battleships as they both only measure 1.70metres (5ft 7inches) -- were at their mesmerising best against the Portuguese which delighted their former national coach Luis Aragones, who had predicted that the Portuguese would beat an off-colour Spanish side.

"We finally saw the Spain with its traditional passing game," he said after the victory.

Indeed it was from a typically precise passing combination from Iniesta and Xavi that David Villa scored the decisive goal in the second-half.

It is just as well for the devilish duo that Villa is on form for they have had to overburden him with their passes given the poor form shown by his strike partner

Fernando Torres.

For both of them it is a welcome high point after both endured injury affected seasons -- Xavi, the player of the Euro 2008 triumph, suffering a calf injury while Iniesta found it hard to shrug off a right thigh injury which looked to still be affecting him in the early stages of the tournament.

Villa hot on Raul's heels

AFP, Paris

Should Spain get to the World Cup final, in-form striker David Villa could write a new page in the tournament's history and over-take Raul as his country's all-time top scorer in one match.

For a generation, Spanish fans have been weaned on goals from Real Madrid goalscoring machine Raul, but suddenly his 44 goals in 102 games look mundane because 'Maravilla' has already smashed 42, in 40 games less.

Give Villa a half-chance and he tends to snap it up -- hence his personal haul of four goals so far, matched only by Argentina's Gonzalo Higuain and Slovakia's Robert Vittek.

Villa, 28, has already become the top marksman for Spain in World Cup history with seven goals to date, leaving behind legendary figures such as Emilio Butragueno, Fernando Hierro, Fernando Morientes and Raul himself, who all netted five times at the tournament.

However, a goal against Chile in the final group match, a 2-1 win, cheered Iniesta up no end and whilst people might have been sharpening the knives over a lowering of standards by the previously imperious Spanish, FIFA's statistics suggest that it has not been because of a failure to convert their passes.

According to FIFA, Xavi has successfully found his target on 80 percent of the 368 passes he has delivered at the finals while Argentinian playmaker Lionel Messi has a success rate of 73 percent on his 267 passes and young German star Mesut Ozil a 71 percent conversion rate from his 179 passes.

For Aragones, though, it is Iniesta that is the symbol of the side and makes its heart beat.

"He (Iniesta) is exceptional and when one on one with an opponent he is extraordinary, and his final delivery exceptional," said Aragones.

"Iniesta brings us so many things. He is the player who brings the most to the Spanish side."



World Cup's joint top-scorer David Villa (2nd from R) watches as defender Gerard Pique (R) controls the ball during Spain's training session at the North West University Sports Village in Pochefstroom yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



FOOTBALL TENNIS: Forward Lucas Barrios heads the ball during a heading drill in Paraguay's training session at the Southdowns College in Centurion on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

It's heart and pride

REUTERS, Irene

Paraguay's "heart" has taken them to the World Cup quarterfinals and they have the "chance of a lifetime" in their next match against Spain, coach Gerardo Martino said on Thursday.

Paraguay beat Japan on penalties after a goalless 120 minutes in the second round after finishing top of Group F by beating Slovakia and drawing with Italy and New Zealand.

"Probably if you did an analysis at this moment in time, there are many teams who are superior to Paraguay in football terms but I don't know if they all have the heart that we have and I don't know if they all recognise the historic moment which is before them in the way that we do," Martino told reporters.

"We have lots of heart and are faced with what is probably a unique opportunity for us, in this respect we are unmatched," he said.

Paraguay have never reached the World Cup semifinals and victory over the Spaniards would set up a last-four meeting with Argentina or Germany.

Martino said his team were playing the right way for a knockout Cup competition.

"If we had to play in a tournament of 20 fixtures we probably wouldn't succeed. But as we will be playing 90 or 120 minutes, with our heart and knowing that we are before the opportunity of our lifetime, we can succeed in our goal," he said.

Striker Roque Santa Cruz said Paraguay loved playing against top teams and that they would be fired up for the Spain clash.

"They have been among the favourites right from the outset and so that will give us a bit of extra motivation," he said. "We know their players very well so it is a case of focusing on what we face in team terms."

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Spain wary of Paraguay threat

PREVIEW

AFP, Johannesburg

Spain will be wary when they face Paraguay on Saturday in Johannesburg's Ellis Park stadium of not making the same mistakes as in the past.

Until two years ago when the Spanish finally delivered on their undoubted promise by winning the European Championships, they had been known as the perennial chokers, or underachievers. Such was the bemusement and indeed amusement in some quarters at Spain's repeated inability to turn potential into achievement, that the term "perennial underachievers" seemed to have become a permanent prefix to the word Spain.

That was finally belied two years ago in Vienna when they beat Germany 1-0 to lift the European title and coming into this competition Spain were seen as joint-favourites alongside Brazil.

But not all lessons had been learned as the Iberians

stumbled in their opening group match and were beaten 1-0 by Switzerland.

That seemed to focus minds, though, and the Spanish regrouped and rediscovered their form to move ominously into the last eight.

Their one concern, if there is one, is that Liverpool forward Fernando Torres has yet to find the net, but coach Vicente Del Bosque brushed aside any criticism of the former Atletico Madrid star.

"Fernando is our centre

forward. He has put in a lot of minutes in four matches and will continue to do so and we have absolute confidence in him," Del Bosque insisted.

"He shoulders a vast amount of work for the team, sticks to the centre-backs (of the opposing team), draws out defences and creates space for (David) Villa and other players behind him."

Torres's strike-partner Villa, who has been finding the back of the net, also

defended his teammate.

"The only thing you can 'reproach' (Torres) for is not to have scored yet. His desire to be with the team is truly spectacular," Villa told Spanish television.

"Torres is not in bad form. He has admirable character and we all know his World Cup moment will arrive -- hopefully against Paraguay on Saturday."

But one thing is certain, it won't be getting any easier for Torres to find the net.

Paraguay have conceded only one goal in this competition, in a 1-1 draw with then reigning champions Italy in their opening game.

But they have only scored three times, needing penalties to advance past Japan in their second round clash following a 0-0 stalemate.

However, star forward Roque Santa Cruz, who

plays for Manchester City in England, says it is unfair to judge the team's strikers just on these last four matches.

"Our team is set up so we can press very early and high up the pitch so because of that we (strikers) do a lot of work defensively," he said.

"Even if we play three strikers we know the guys playing either side will make a lot of sacrifices and get back to win back the ball early so we can get pressure on other teams."

"It's been working fantastically so far. The chances are there so if we haven't scored it's not that we haven't continued on from qualification where we were scoring for fun in the national team for four years."

"Now we're not doing it but it's just a matter of putting it in the net and now is the right moment to do so."



Blanc made French coach

AFP, Paris

Laurent Blanc was officially appointed France coach on Friday with the mission to restore the team's pride after their disastrous World Cup performance.

The 44-year-old, a prominent member of France's 1998 World Cup-winning squad, replaces Raymond Domenech, whose contract ended with France's group stage exit from the 2010 finals.

Blanc's task will be to qualify the team for the 2012 European Championship finals in Poland and Ukraine and help them make a fresh start after the World Cup debacle.

The former defender, who coached Girondins Bordeaux to the 2009 Ligue 1 title, was appointed during a council meeting of the French Football Federation (FFF) in Paris.

FFF president Jean-Pierre Escalettes formally handed in his resignation at the meeting, having said on Monday he would quit after the federation was blamed for the way it handled a player revolt in South Africa.

"I have decided to resign because it is my duty," Escalettes told a news conference on Friday. "I accept my share of responsibility."

Domenech's six-year tenure ended in shame when France left the World Cup with a point and a goal after a scandal involving players' boycotting a training session in support of striker Nicolas Anelka, who was sent home for insulting the coach.

"Raymond Domenech has humbly admitted that he had made mistakes and so have I," said Escalettes, who had faced criticism for leading the controversial Domenech in charge after the side's Euro 2008 flop when they crashed out in the first round following two defeats and a draw.

The 75-year-old Escalettes and Domenech's lack of authority were exposed when they failed to convince the players they should train at their base in Knysna, Western Cape.

"I felt humiliated. I am ashamed and I present my apologies to all those who loved and believed in that France team and to the whole world."

A caretaker FFF president will be named at a council meeting on July 23 and will stay in charge until an election is organised later this year.

France have plenty of rebuilding to do after the team looked lost on the pitch in South Africa and tarnished their reputation with bickering and scandals off it.

"All my life I tried to give another image than the one I am leaving and I feel sad," Escalettes said. "My successor will have to draw the conclusions from what happened to make sure it never happens again."

A prolific player both at international and club levels, Blanc has already enjoyed success in his coaching career with Bordeaux.

Nicknamed "The President" for his calm authority in his playing days, he will initially be more respected than the controversial Domenech, if only for his far more impressive resume.

"I believe in Laurent Blanc and in the team he will come up with," Escalettes said.

The debate on who should run the France team is not over with a growing discrepancy between the FFE, in charge of amateur soccer and the national side, and the French Football League (LFP), responsible for professional soccer.

"The only dignified and responsible attitude would be for the members of the federal council (of the FFE) to resign collectively," LFP president Frederic Thiriez, also an FFF vice-president, told reporters just before Friday's meeting.

That did not happen on Friday but internal squabbling looks set to continue, with those responsible for professional soccer asking for more say in the governance of the national team.

JABULANI JUGGLER SITTING PRETTY

Cuban Erick Hernandez on Thursday said he had set a world record for juggling the Jabulani World Cup ball, while sitting down.

Hernandez told reporters he had juggled the Jabulani -- which some World Cup stars criticised for its lightness and unpredictable trajectories -- for three hours, three minutes and 14 seconds at a Havana hotel.

"I came in a bit tired as I have been doing exhibitions during the World Cup," said the 43-year-old, nicknamed 'The Dominator'.

Hernandez, a self-confessed Brazil fan, described the ball as "having a good bounce" and "very lively".

He already holds a Guinness World record for heading the ball 319 times in just one minute and he even kicked a ball to the finish line in a marathon, completing the 42 kilometres in 7hr 17min.

The ball skills run in the family as brother Douglas managed an impressive -- and surely exhausting -- 100,026 touches in a 15-hour session in 1997.

Now Erick says he wants to try a 24-hour session.

TRIBUTE TO CABANAS

Paraguay's historic run to the World Cup quarterfinals is being lived and breathed by Salvador Cabanas, their star striker who had to miss the finals after being shot in the head in January.

However, the 29-year-old Mexico-based star -- who was shot by a drug dealer in the public loos of a bar in Mexico on January 25 -- is very much on the minds of his teammates in South Africa, who dedicate every match to the man who was their leading scorer in the qualifying phase with six goals.

According to his agent, though, Cabanas, who is continuing his recuperation in a clinic near to Buenos Aires, found the tension almost too much to bear as their Last 16 clash with Japan went to penalties after the match finished 0-0.

"Cabanas was crying, and jumping around," revealed Jose Maria Gonzalez.

"He was very excited during the penalty shootout." His teammates -- who take on European champions Spain in their quarterfinal on Saturday -- have kept in regular contact with him.

"We are also playing for him (Cabanas)," said midfielder Cristian Riveros.

"We call him regularly in his room, and he is doing well."

Paraguay's Argentinian coach Gerardo Martino said that he and the squad wanted to go as far as possible as a tribute to him.

"We wanted to be able to pay homage to him during the World Cup finals because he would have been with us if he had not been the victim of this crime," said Martino.

COACH QUILTS OVER CYBERATTACKS

Huh Jung-Moo Friday stepped down as South Korea's coach, citing distress from scathing attacks over his leadership during the football World Cup in South Africa.

"I've decided not to seek a second term," Huh, 55, told journalists. "My family members suffered a lot ... I want to have time to recharge myself and spend some time with my family," said Huh whose 30-month coaching contract expires with the end of the World Cup.

The Korea Football Association Chairman Cho Chung-Yun said earlier he had wanted Huh to remain in the job after he successfully guided South Korea through to the final 16 where they were eliminated by Uruguay.

Huh's wife, Choi Mi-Na, told the Chosun Daily that she and their children had been deeply wounded by hurtful Internet postings.

"I told him he should quit ... The coach and all my family members have been hurt enough," she said.

KOMANO TO GET MEDAL

Japan defender Yuichi Komano is poised to get a medal after his missed penalty kick led to the country's World Cup exit in the last 16.

The governor of Komano's native Wakayama prefecture told his efforts in South Africa.

"We would like to present Komano with a medal for giving people such dreams and emotions," said Yoshinobu Nisaka Wakayama, who watched Japan's penalty shootout defeat by Paraguay at a public viewing area with Komano's mother.

The medal is unlikely to offer much consolation to Komano after he missed Japan's third kick in the shootout in Pretoria.

"I just kept looking at the floor but my teammates helped lift me," said the player. "(Defender) Tulio told me he would've missed it too. At least I could come home with my head up."



CABANAS



JUNG-MOO