



AN ALVES SPECIAL: Iran goalkeeper Seyed Mahdi Rahmati (R) fails to stop a stunning freekick from Brazil wingback Daniel Alves (not in picture) during their international friendly in Abu Dhabi on Thursday.

Brazil ease past Iran

Football

AFP, Abu Dhabi

A much changed Brazil from the one that disappointed at the World Cup finals eased to a 3-0 victory over Iran in an international friendly here on Thursday.

Goals by Daniel Alves, Alexandre Pato and Nilmar were enough to see the Brazilians to an easy win on what was their second appearance in the United Arab Emirates - they walloped the UAE 8-0 in 2005.

Brazil - now under the management of Mano Menezes after Dunga was sacked following their exit in the World Cup quarterfinals to the Netherlands - opened the scoring in the 14th minute through a terrific freekick by Alves.

Despite being cheered on by the 20,000 strong crowd the Iranians couldn't deliver much of a threat but the Brazilians also could not add to their tally during the first period.

Their domination eventually paid off when Pato - who was left out of the World Cup squad - struck in the 69th minute as he shot home from inside the area and Nilmar scored in similar fashion two minutes into time added on.

Menezes, whose first match in charge saw his side beat the United States 2-0, said that it had been another chance to try out some fresh talent as he tries to put a side together for next year's Copa America and then for the 2014 World Cup which Brazil are hosting.

"At the moment, we are in the middle of testing out certain players in order that we can evaluate them and their ability at this level," said Menezes, who was not first choice for the hotseat but got the nod when Fluminense refused to release Muricy Ramalho.

"We are in the early stages of constructing a new team and we have a lot of work to do.

"We are going to continue these experiments in the next lot of friendlies with Ukraine and Argentina so we get an idea of their potential," added the 48-year-old former Corinthians handler.

Pato said he was delighted with his and the team's performance.

"We are happy with our performance throughout the match which was a tough one to play in," said the 21-year-old AC Milan marksman.

"We are also satisfied with how the less experienced players performed."

Playmakers boost France

AFP, Paris



France coach Laurent Blanc is grappling with the configuration of his midfield prior to the visit of Romania for the Euro 2012 Group D qualifier at the Stade de France here on Saturday.

Les Bleus got their qualifying campaign back on track with a convincing 2-0 victory at Bosnia-Herzegovina in their last outing, having slumped to a shock 1-0 defeat at home to Belarus in their opening game.

The basis for the win in Sarajevo was a dominant display from central midfielders Alou Diarra, Yann M'Vila and Abou Diaby in a solid 4-3-3 formation, but both Diarra and Diaby are doubts for the Romania game.

Diarra limped out of training with a leg injury on Wednesday, while Diaby has not trained all week due to an ankle problem sustained on club duty with Arsenal.

The blow of their likely unavailability has been softened by the returns of Yoann Gourcuff and Samir Nasri from suspension and injury respectively, but Blanc must now decide how to accommodate both playmakers in his side.

Gourcuff enjoyed a fine working relationship with Blanc during their time together at Bordeaux, where they won the French league title and the League Cup in the 2008-09 season.

The Lyon player is expected to become the key creative force in Blanc's new-look France team, but questions remain about how to fit him into the same starting XI as Arsenal's Nasri.

"Nothing obliges us to have a real playmaker, but players capable of making the team play better are always useful," said Blanc.

"Samir and Yoann can both fulfil this role."

In training at their Clairefontaine base this week, Blanc has reportedly experimented with a 4-2-3-1 system featuring Gourcuff alongside M'Vila in deep midfield roles, with Nasri operating further forward.

Gourcuff's Lyon team-mate Anthony Revellere is expected to come into the team in place of injured right-back Bacary Sagna.

Karim Benzema arrived late for the training camp along with Real Madrid team-mate Lassana Diarra, but Blanc says it has not jeopardised the former Lyon striker's chances of starting the game.

The France coach has also called on his players to shrug off the complex that has seen them produce some timid performances at the Stade de France in recent years, culminating in the loss to Belarus.

"When you play in a stadium you don't know, which is full of history, it can diminish your abilities and prevent you from expressing yourself," he said.

"The Stade de France has to become our stadium."

France drew home and away against Romania in qualifying for the World Cup and the sides also drew 0-0 when they met in the group phase at the last European Championship in 2008.

Romania failed to qualify for the World Cup after finishing second-bottom of France's group behind Austria and Lithuania.

They opened their Euro 2012 qualification bid with a disappointing 1-1 draw at home to Albania and were then held to a goalless draw in Belarus.

Romania coach Razvan Lucescu responded by recalling FC Timisoara winger Ianis Zicu and Lazio left-back Stefan Radu after absences of three and two years respectively, while midfielder Iulian Apostol earned his first call-up of 2010.

"We're still training with the idea of winning in our minds," Lucescu told AFP this week.

"We never prepare for a game thinking about defeat. I want us to win."

Romania captain Cristian Chivu says his side have no reason to doubt themselves, despite failing to sparkle in their first two games.

"There were no defeats," said the Inter Milan player.

"We should have beaten Albania, but at Belarus we got an acceptable result. Qualification is still up for grabs."

Khedira defends Ronaldo

AFP, Berlin

Germany midfielder Sami Khedira on Thursday insisted his Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo is a 'super guy' and is a world away from his stereotyped image of an arrogant player.

"He's a super guy, a really nice person, not arrogant at all. In the changing rooms, he is a funny guy," Khedira, 23, said at a press conference before Friday's Euro 2012 qualifier against Turkey in Berlin.

Khedira and Germany team-mate Mesut Ozil both joined Real from the Bundesliga after the World Cup and former Manchester United star Ronaldo has helped the German pair feel at home in Madrid, says Khedira.

"He has helped Mesut and myself to integrate," he said.

"As he speaks very good English, you can ask all the questions you want and he helps us as much as he can."

Portugal star Ronaldo, who signed for Real in 2009 for 94 million euros, has been criticised in the past for his "selfishness", notably by Sara Carbonero, a Spanish journalist and girlfriend of Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Japan stun Argentina

Football

AFP, Saitama

Japan upset a full-strength Argentina side 1-0 Friday in a historic friendly win that crowned the coaching debut of former AC Milan boss Alberto Zaccheroni.

Shimizu S-Pulse striker Shinji Okazaki scored the winner in the 19th minute while the Blue Samurai stopped several scoring attempts by Barcelona star Lionel Messi.

Messi's 25-metre free kick in stoppage time banged off a Japanese wall and a sold-out crowd of more than 60,000 at the Saitama Stadium roared in joy at the final whistle.

It was the first win for the Blue Samurai in seven international matches against Argentina.

The result ended Argentina caretaker coach Sergio Batista's 100 per cent record since he took over from Diego Maradona after the South Americans crumbled to Germany in the World Cup quarter-finals.

Batista's squad beat Ireland 1-0 away on August 12 and crushed world champions Spain 4-1 at home on September 7, but came unstuck against a committed Japanese side.

"I feel very happy. My debut match turned out to be such an important event," said the 57-year-old Italian Zaccheroni, who has managed six Serie-A teams.

"I told my players in the bench before the match that if you work hard it will produce a result."

Japan, who reached the last-16 in South Africa for their best World Cup finish on foreign soil, fielded seven European-based players.

Liverpool at points penalty risk

INTERNET

Liverpool would be at risk of a nine-point deduction if the owners' holding company is put into administration, it has emerged.

Initially it had been thought the Premier League would not penalise the club for Kop Holdings becoming insolvent, but now the threat of a points deduction has become a serious one.

The Royal Bank of Scotland could put Kop Holdings, the company owned by Tom Hicks and George Gillett, into administration if the Americans continue to block a takeover by New England Sports Ventures and have not paid off their £280million debt to the bank by October 15. Under Premier League rules, the fact that the holding company is solely concerned with the ownership of Liverpool and football-related matters could trigger the nine-point penalty.

An insider told Press Association Sport: "It is not completely clear whether the nine-point penalty would come into play but it would be a risk."

West Ham has been used as an example of why the Reds might escape a deduction if administration goes ahead when it was owned by Icelandic bank Straumur.

Owen hoping for recall

Football

SOCCERNET

Manchester United striker Michael Owen insists he is not writing off his England career.

Owen, 30, was once again overlooked by England boss Fabio Capello as Bolton's Kevin Davies earned a shock international call-up for the Euro 2012 qualifier against Montenegro.

After Jermain Defoe, Bobby Zamora and Gabriel Agbonlahor were all ruled out due to injury, Owen's England exile appeared to be over, only for Capello to ignore him in favour of Davies.

But despite his latest setback, Owen, who has netted 40 times in 89 appearances for his country, is not about to bring an end to his international career.

"I haven't resigned myself to never playing for England again," he told the Daily Mirror, "but I'm not stupid enough to get myself worked up before every squad is announced and then go, 'Oh no, the world's caved in and I'm not in it again'."

"Everyone deals with things in different ways. The first time I wasn't named in the squad I was really gutted. The second time I was pretty gutted, the next time I was just gutted and so on. People deal with knockbacks in life, whatever they may be, in different ways. You build up a protective mechanism so it won't hurt you, but that doesn't mean I've given up."

Owen last donned the Three Lions as a substitute during a 1-0 defeat to France in March 2008, but he believes he is too long in the tooth to vent his frustrations about being omitted.

"I really haven't thought about reasons why I've not been picked. I'd love to play for my country again, but I don't look out for the squad expecting my name to be in it, unless someone phones me to tell me otherwise. Unfortunately you can't say a lot of the things you believe, because it will come out the wrong way and be misinterpreted."

"I still watch England, of course. I still have a lot of friends in the team and you can't play for your country as long as I did and not be interested in how they're doing."

Chances have been at a premium at club level for the former Liverpool star. Owen has started just two of United's ten games this season - though he showed he still possesses an eye for goal with a brace in the Carling Cup win over Scunthorpe.

With so few opportunities to impress Sir Alex Ferguson, Owen admits there is huge pressure to perform when he is called upon.

'WC fatigue no excuse'

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich defender Philipp Lahm insisted Friday the defending Bundesliga champions can no longer blame their poor early season form on fatigue from the World Cup.

Germany finished third in South Africa and eight of the current Munich squad were involved in the tournament.

However, Bayern have failed to impress so far in the Bundesliga and are already 13 points behind surprise leaders Mainz with only seven games played.

Lahm will captain Germany in their Euro 2012 qualifier against Turkey in Berlin on Friday night, and told German daily Bild: "We have to stop using fatigue from the World Cup as an excuse."

"The problem at Bayern Munich is that you are always under pressure to win and sometimes that pressure is crippling."

With goal-shy Bayern down in 12th position and 13 points adrift, Lahm is clearly worried about making up the deficit.

"Of course we won't give up, but we must score more goals and stop making mistakes," added Lahm.

"Then maybe we can pick up some points and hope at the end we have made up the 13 points."

"It just adds a new problem. Now we are far behind in the league, so there is added pressure to give everything we can."



Japan forward Shinji Okazaki (L) is challenged by Argentina defender Gabriel Heinze during their international friendly in Saitama yesterday.