

Robinho becomes a mainstay

Football

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

He may have failed to pull up many trees at Real Madrid or Manchester City while his return to Santos didn't last long before he fell back on his feet at Milan - but whatever his club record Robinho has become a fixture with the Boys from Brazil.

As Brazil head to the Copa America in Argentina seeking a third straight win in the world's oldest continental tournament Robinho appears to have exorcised the demons of inconsistency which marred his time first at the Bernabeu then with City in a somewhat ill-starred Premier League stint.

He landed the title with Milan and scored almost a goal every other game and that has bolstered morale as he looks to net a second Copa winners medal after 2007, in which he ended up tournament top scorer.

Now 27, Robinho - full name Robson de Souza - is entering what should be the peak of a career which has already yielded two league titles apiece with first Santos then Real before his Italian exploits.

At international level his 84 caps make him ostensibly the perfect candidate to take on the role of "big brother" to emerging talents such as Neymar, a teammate at Santos last year.

Coach Mano Menezes has confidence in a player who can appear diffident to a fault but whose talent came close to reaping rewards at last year's World Cup.

His goal against Holland looked set to secure a semi-final place before the Dutch turned the match on its head with a double riposte.

But since that defeat Robinho has bounced back with Milan and was, along with Dani Alves, the only other survivor of the loss

to play in the first match of Menezes' reign, after he had replaced Dunga as coach, in a friendly against the United States in August.

His stature has grown such that he has also taken the captain's armband in several recent internationals as Menezes looks to him to provide leadership in the cycle which will take the 'selecao' up to the 2014 World Cup which they will host for the first time since 1950.

When Inter Milan defender Lucio is around he is still the first choice skipper but Robinho has clearly shown he can step into the role when required.

With 27 goals to his name for his country, Robinho is the top active scorer in the Brazil squad.

"Being the 'artilheiro' of the team gives me extra motivation. I hope I can turn in some good showings and score the goals we need to get to the top at the Copa," he told reporters.

Earlier in his career, at Santos, a talking point was Robinho's penchant for "pedaladas" - or stepovers, feinting this way and that before haring forward, shutting the ball at speed between his two feet, the kind of trick which brought comparisons with former club idol Pele.

But in more recent years he has let the showboating take more of a backseat and worked on his finishing and overall work rate, while also contributing to the development of youngsters such as Neymar and Ganso, who have long looked up to him in the big brother role which the now retired Ronaldo played for him.

"All those good things he passed on to me I now need to pass on to youngsters such as Neymar, Lucas or Ganso," Robinho declared ahead of the recent friendly win over Romania which saw Ronaldo make a swansong appearance.



Brazil forward Robinho smiles during a training session in Campana on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

FIFA slates Brazil

AFP, Moscow

FIFA Secretary General Jerome Valcke on Friday issued a scathing assessment of Brazil's 2014 World Cup preparations, saying the future hosts still lacked stadia, airports and transportation.

"They have much still to deliver," Valcke said at the Inside World Football Moscow Forum, a major conference on the hosting of football events, in the Russian capital.

"We do not have the stadia, we don't have airports, we don't have a national transportation system in place."

Valcke emphasised that FIFA considers the awarding of a World Cup to a host country to be a final judgement. But his unusually blunt remarks came after criticism of Brazil's preparations by FIFA president Sepp Blatter in March.

"We cannot have a stadium ready at the last minute... meaning that it will already be two months or two weeks prior to the World Cup," Valcke added.

He unfavourably compared Brazil's preparations to the progress of Russia, which was only last year awarded the right to host the 2018 edition of the World Cup.

"The stadia are the most important things. We are more advanced in Russia even than we are in Brazil," said Valcke.

China, N Korea crash

Football

AFP, Singapore

China crashed out of London 2012 Olympics qualifying in controversial circumstances while Asian champions Japan survived a scare to make it safely through to the next stage.

Australia and South Korea also booked their places in the final qualifying round alongside resurgent Malaysia, while United Arab Emirates dashed North Korean hopes with a narrow 2-1 aggregate win.

But the biggest casualty of the night was China, who had a player sent off and a goal disallowed in Muscat before humble Oman scored three goals in extra time to run out 4-1 aggregate winners.

China, fighting to overturn a shock 1-0 deficit from the first leg in Shanghai, lost midfielder Zhang Linpeng to injury after just four minutes but managed to level the tie through Wu Xi deep

into the second half.

But Cao Yunding was red-carded for a late tackle just three minutes later, before the linesman's intervention ruled out a dramatic stoppage-time winner when Wu's close-range strike was flagged offside.

During extra time in baking conditions, Hussain Al Hadhri scored twice and Yaqoob Abdul Karim added another to extend China's miserable international football record.

"The weather was hot and the players are not used to this type of weather, and in extra time a lot of the players were suffering and we could not organise ourselves properly," said assistant coach Li Bing.

"It is shame we have lost the chance to play in the next phase, but we have learnt a lot from this match."

Saki Oriki eased Japanese jitters in Kuwait when he netted first at Mohammed Al Hamad Stadium, extending their advantage to 4-1. But the nerves returned when Kuwait scored twice in the second

half to run the Asian giants close.

A 1-1 draw in Jordan was enough for South Korea after they convincingly won the first leg in Seoul. But Australia had no concerns as they slotted four unanswered goals past Yemen to run up a 7-0 aggregate score.

Iraq overturned a 1-0 first-leg deficit to advance 2-1 at the expense of arch-rivals Iran, while Southeast Asian champions Malaysia beat Lebanon to go through.

Among other results, Saudi Arabia finished 6-1 winners against Vietnam, Qatar ousted India and Uzbekistan booted out Hong Kong.

This week's 12 winning teams will be split into three groups of four for final qualifying, with the three top sides all gaining automatic entry to the London Olympics.

The second-placed teams go into a three-way round robin, with the winner playing off against a side from the African confederation for another ticket to the Games.

African duo seek cures

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

Cameroon and Ghana face difficult 2011 All-Africa Games third round qualifiers this weekend as they seek cures for Olympic hangovers.

The countries were shock casualties in second round eliminators last April for the 2012 London Games with Cameroon losing on penalties to Tanzania and Ghana ousted by Sudan after a home defeat.

Cameroon, seeking a fourth consecutive All-Africa Games title, confront the Democratic Republic of Congo in Kinshasa while Ghana travel to Benin City for a showdown with bitter rivals Nigeria.

Kenya meet Uganda and South Africa play Zimbabwe in the other fixtures and Guinea face Senegal next weekend while hosts Mozambique, Egypt and Madagascar have secured

places at the eight-team September finals.

Cameroon face Congolese opponents also in need of a boost after conceding a late goal at home to Morocco last weekend and bowing out of the Olympic Games race.

DR Congo defeated Gabon narrowly at home and away in the previous round while Cameroon had a bye in a region-based qualification competition for the Maputo tournament.

Ghana have bolstered their squad with numerous foreign-based stars led by Marseille midfielder Andre Ayew after paying a heavy price for using largely local players at home to Sudan.

David Duncan was fired after the Olympic Games debacle and assistant senior national coach Kwesi Appiah has been drafted in for the clash with the Nigerian 'Dream Team'.

Nigeria defeated Tanzania 3-0 at the match venue last weekend in an

Olympic qualifier with star striker Ekigho Ehiusun scoring the first goal and creating the other two.

Kenya are lucky participants as second round opponents Eritrea withdrew for unexplained reasons after building a 4-1 first-leg advantage while Uganda won home and away against Tanzania.

South Africa will lack injured midfield stars, Footballer of the Year Thulani Serero and runner-up Andile Jali, for the visit of Zimbabwe to Sinaba Stadium 50 kilometres east of Johannesburg.

Simba Sithole is the Zimbabwe danger man having struck five goals in four qualifiers against Zambia and Botswana to be leading scorer in the qualifying competition.

All-Africa Games and Olympic Games qualifiers are restricted to under-23 footballers, offering rising stars like Ehiusun a chance to make an international impact.



An octopus named Paula predicted a win for Canada against Germany in the opening match of the FIFA Women's World Cup in Konstanz yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Now Paula in action

Football

AFP, Berlin

During last year's World Cup in South Africa, Paul the Octopus shot to fame for his accurate match predictions, so for the women's competition starting in Germany on Sunday, step forward... Paula.

The tentacled tipster was put through her paces on Friday in Konstanz in southern Germany, but made the shock choice that Canada will win Sunday's opening match against the hosts in Berlin.

The octopus, whose gender is actually unknown, had to choose between two compartments in a plastic box in its tank, one with a Germany flag and one with a Canada one, with each containing a tasty morsel.

The prediction is a bold one as Germany, whose women are hoping to win their third consecutive World Cup, have never lost any of their previous nine matches to Canada.

Paula, however, is only one of eight salty soothsayers housed at eight different Sea Life centres in Germany competing to become the official successor to British-born Paul, who lived in an aquarium in Oberhausen.

All eight will be asked to predict the outcome of all Germany's matches in the June 26-July 17 women's competition.

While Paula and an eight-legged colleague in Munich both backed Canada on Friday, the fishy forecasters in Berlin, Koenigswinter and Oberhausen plumped

for Germany, making the combined predictions 3-2 in the hosts' favour.

But the method of enticing the underwater oracles to predict the winner proved to be far from fool-proof -- three octopuses in other locations in Germany snubbed the treats on offer and ignored both boxes.

This was determined by aquarium officials to mean that they expect a draw.

Meanwhile one-year-old African elephant Nelly got in on the forecasting act at the Serengeti Park in Hohenhausen, near Hanover, by predicting a win for Germany after opting to kick a ball into the Canada net when given a choice.

But it is all a far cry so far from last summer's performances by Paul -- who has become something of an icon here -- after he kept a clean sheet in the men's competition in South Africa.

He correctly foretold the outcome of all Germany's games, even a defeat to Serbia in the group stage and to Spain in the semi-finals, as well as Spain's eventual victory in the final.

In the process he cost bookmakers a fortune and won worldwide fame, with rolling news channels in Germany carrying live coverage when he was asked to choose -- as they did with Paula on Friday.

Paul died aged nearly three in October, sparking hundreds of messages of condolence from his fan club on social networking website Facebook, whose ranks have more than tripled since his death to more than 200,000.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you think Sanath Jayasuriya should've been picked?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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www.twitter.com/dssport

What to WATCH

STAR Sports

Wimbledon Championships

Third Round

Live from 5:00pm

STAR Cricket

England v Sri Lanka

Only T20

Live at 7:30pm

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League

Muktijoddha v Rahmatganj

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

Arambagh v Ctg Mohammedan

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal