

# Argentina kick-start Copa



## Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina hope to take the first step Friday to ending a trophy drought of almost two decades when they meet Bolivia in their opening Copa America pool match at La Plata outside Buenos Aires.

Argentinian fans have ridden a dizzy rollercoaster in recent years.

On the positive side, they have seen their youngsters capture two consecutive Olympic crowns and live in hope that the greatest current player in the world, Lionel Messi, can finally this summer transfer his effervescent Barcelona form to the national shirt.

On the negative side, the seniors struggled to qualify for last summer's World Cup in South Africa. Having finally got there under the passionate but controversial tutelage of former idol Diego Maradona, they shone brightly enough in the group phase only to be flattened by Germany thereafter.

That heralded the start of the post-Maradona era under Sergio Batista, likewise a member of the 1986 World Cup-winning side.

Since those heady days, a 1990 final loss to the Germans aside, Argentina have struggled to find a winning blend either at world or indeed continental level.

Their 1993 Copa final win, courtesy of a Gabriel Batistuta double over Mexico, remains the team's last senior honour.

Even that triumph was a seat-of-the-pants affair with penalty shootout wins in the quarters over Brazil and then Colombia in the semis.

Since then the slate has been blank, hence the imperative to bring some cheer back to the home fans -

many still digesting the shock relegation of River Plate, 33-times national champions but just relegated for the first time.

Batista will have felt that shock demise as much as anyone having won the title with the club 21 years ago.

Now the feeling is the squad can end the drought, says skipper and Barcelona stalwart Javier

World Cup implosion against the Germans, Mascherano was adamant.

"No, we have a different coach, the squad has been revamped. It's a new group, with new goals to achieve."

The former Liverpool star had earlier praised Batista as someone who "has very clear ideas and is able to pass them on."

After much bickering between Maradona and the Argentina Football Association (AFA), whose head, Julio Grondona, is scarcely a personal friend of the Pibe de Oro (golden boy), the AFA turned to Batista as the man to spark a revival in fortunes.

He has the kudos of having engineered the 2008 Beijing Games win and now will expect to steer a path past the Bolivians - generally continental minnows but who did nonetheless thrash their rivals 6-1 in a World Cup qualifier, albeit at altitude in La Paz. Next up will be Colombia and Costa Rica, completing a group the hosts ought to win with something to spare if only for their firepower of Messi, Carlos Tevez, Gonzalo Higuain and Juventus target Sergio Aguero, as well as the wily Angel Di Maria.

Friendly form is unlikely to prove much of a guide - but if recent outings are anything to go by Argentina are somewhat schizophrenic. Batista recorded early wins over both Spain and Brazil but those successes were followed by losses to Nigeria and Poland.

More pertinently, Argentina are desperate to prevent a Brazil hattrick on their own soil, having lost the past two finals to the auriverde, who start their Group B campaign Sunday against Venezuela and later meet Paraguay and Ecuador.

Motivation enough, quite apart from 18 barren years.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian starlet Neymar takes part in a training session in Campana on Thursday.

## Thailand sign Schaefer

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand on Friday officially signed Germany's Winfried Schaefer as coach for its national football team on a three-year contract, a top official said.

"He started work today, Worawi Makudi, president of the Football Association of Thailand, told AFP. "I have high hopes for him because he used to work with Cameroon and other teams."

Schaefer, 61, led Cameroon to victory in the 2002 African Nations Cup. He has also coached United Arab Emirates side Al Ain and FK Baku of Azerbaijan.

Thailand's previous coach Bryan Robson, a former England and Manchester United captain, quit last month after less than two years in the job, citing health and family reasons.

Robson underwent surgery for throat cancer in March and has previously said doctors were optimistic he would make a full recovery.

He won 90 international caps during a glittering career, including 65 as captain, despite a string of major injuries. England manager Sir Bobby Robson nicknamed his namesake "Captain Marvel".

But he had a patchy record with Thailand since taking over in September 2009, winning only seven of 18 matches.

## Nuno joins Braga

AFP, Lisbon

Former Portugal striker Nuno Gomes has joined Europa League runners-up Sporting Braga on a one-year contract, the Portuguese club announced on Thursday.

"For Braga it's very good to have a player with the past and the image of Nuno Gomes," said Braga president Antonio Salvador, whose team finished fourth in the Portuguese championship last season.

The 34-year-old Nuno Gomes, who won 77 Portugal caps, left Benfica earlier this month.

Benfica had offered Gomes a back-room role at the club but at the time he said he hoped to continue playing "for at least an extra season".

The former Benfica captain made just six league appearances last season but still managed to score four goals.

Gomes began his career with Boavista in 1994 and joined Benfica in 1997, returning to the Lisbon club in 2002 after two seasons with Fiorentina in Italy.

## Black Cats snare duo

AFP, London



English Premier League side Sunderland on Thursday announced the signings of South Korea striker Ji Dong-Won and English midfielder

Craig Gardner.

Ji, 20, joined from Chunnam Dragons for an undisclosed fee and signed a three-year contract at the Stadium of Light.

He has scored six goals in 11 appearances for South Korea, including four at the Asian Cup in Qatar in January.

"I am so satisfied to be able to come to a good club, a nice club in the world's number one league," Ji told Sunderland's in-house television station, SAFC TV.

"I am happy because I have a chance to challenge the biggest players, and that gives me motivation.

"As a striker, I like to overwhelm defenders. My aim is to help the team get as many points as possible. That is what will give me

satisfaction."

Sunderland coach Steve Bruce said: "The boy has been in fantastic form for both club and country and he was one of South Korea's stand-out performers at the Asian Cup, so we are delighted to bring him to Sunderland.

"The Premier League is very different to the K-League, so there is hard work ahead, but you just have to look at players like (Manchester United midfielder) Park Ji-Sung and (Bolton winger) Lee Chung-Yong to see how well Korean players are adapting to its pace and physicality."

Gardner signed from relegated Birmingham City on a three-year deal, for a reported fee of around £6 million (\$9.6m).

The 24-year-old, who joined Birmingham from their arch-rivals Aston Villa, was the Blues' top scorer last season with 10 goals and was a part of the team that won the League Cup before succumbing to relegation in May.

Gardner told SAFC TV: "It's unbelievable, to be honest."

## Messi the key man



## Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina skipper Javier Mascherano says the two-time world and 14-time South American champions must try to play to Lionel Messi's strengths at the Copa America, which starts on Friday.

Argentina are under pressure to deliver on home soil, particularly having not won a major event since the 1993 Copa.

There is also the added motivation that failure would likely allow bitter rivals Brazil to walk off with a hat-trick of successes after 2004 and 2007, both achieved at the expense of the albiceleste.

Mascherano says if they can harness Barcelona team-mate Messi's full range of talents then they can send

their rivals packing.

"When you have the best player in the world on your team then you have to make use of that," Mascherano told Argentine daily Clarin in an interview published on Thursday.

"It's not such a bad thing to be depending on the best there is."

Mascherano also rejected the suggestion that Argentina might succumb to over-dependence or 'Messi-dependencia' on the current FIFA Ballon d'Or, who enjoyed a stellar season with Barca.

Without subordinating their style to one man, the team must nonetheless play to Messi's strengths, says Mascherano, as "He is always able to come up with something different in a millisecond. Clearly it's best if Leo has a team behind him backing him up and helping him."

"We have to open up the supply lines

to him in the final 30 metres and give him options, get the ball through to him.

"Then he can produce that change of rhythm that he does so superbly and derive an advantage from that," said Mascherano.

The Copa hosts were hit hard by their demoralising loss in the World Cup to Germany last summer, which brought the curtain down on Diego Maradona's reign and saw 1986 world champion Sergio Batista ushered into the hotseat.

Mascherano says the whole squad are now champing at the bit to show they have moved on.

"It's a long time since we won a title. We want to win the Copa to recover our mystique and reaffirm our footballing philosophy," added Mascherano, noting that a win would give Argentina a place at the 2013 Confederations Cup.



PHOTO: AFP

Lille goalkeeper Mickael Landreau juggles the ball with his feet during a training session at the Luchin Losc in Campin-en-Pevele on Thursday.

## River the talk of the town



## Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina stars may be plotting the demise of Bolivia in Friday's opening Copa America fixture - but it is the relegation of emblemic club River Plate which has been the chief topic of conversation in recent days.

Even the arrival of European-based megastars such as Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez has not been able to distract fans from the shock of River's demise last Sunday as they went down for the first time in their 110-year history, amid tears and scenes of violent mayhem.

The Buenos Aires team are Argentina's most successful club with 33 championships to their name, and their rivalry with Boca Juniors, based in the same city, is one of the most intense in all sport - but they will not meet in the league next season after River lost a two-legged play-off against lowly Cordoba outfit Belgrano.

Primera B side had won the first leg 2-0, meaning River Plate had to win by two clear goals to stay up under the play-off system rules, but could only draw 1-1, sending the Millionaires, whose president is 1978 world Cup-winning skipper Daniel Passarella, down.

Argentines are fanatical about their club football and many are incredulous at what has happened to River.

The media also have focused on the story, making the run-up to the 43rd Copa a fairly tepid affair by comparison.

Supporters went on the rampage, leading to some 70 people being hurt and around 100 arrests at the club's Monumental stadium.

Pictures of the unrest went around the globe at the worst possible time for the image of the Argentinian game.

### SPORTS POLL

### WEEKLY QUESTION

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