

Ecuador lose Valencia

AFP, Buenos Aires

Ecuador midfielder Antonio Valencia is set to miss Saturday's meeting with Venezuela after injuring his ankle in his side's opener with Paraguay in Santa Fe, a team medical spokesman said Tuesday.

"We don't yet know" if the Manchester United star has a chance of making the Venezuela game, Patricio Maldonado told reporters, after a colleague earlier stated a player had stepped on his foot and "almost fractured it again."

Valencia dislocated and broke the same ankle last September during a Champions League outing.

"We have carried out tests and he's now resting," said Ocampo. "We are administering anti-inflammatories and a few anti-biotics."

After taking on the Venezuelans, who drew their opener with fancied Brazil, Ecuador finally face the arrival in Cordoba on July 13 in their final group match.

Inter chase Alvarez

AFP, Rome

Argentinian midfielder Ricky Alvarez is on the verge of completing a 12 million euro move from Argentina side Velez Sarsfield to Inter, according to reports here Wednesday.

"I leave for Milan on Thursday, I'm happy, thanks to all the Fortineros (Velez supporters)," said the 23 year-old on Twitter.

The Corriere dello Sport says that Alvarez has agreed a five-year deal with Inter paying out an initial nine million euros plus an additional three million in bonuses.

Alvarez, nicknamed the "Kaka of Velez" is considered to be one of the great promises of the Argentinian game.



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi warms up during a training session at the Cementerio de Elefantes Stadium on Tuesday ahead of their Copa America clash against Colombia today. PHOTO: AFP

To be or not to be

AFP, Buenos Aires



Argentina as they plot Colombia's downfall at the Copa America on Wednesday.

Messi is the great conundrum for a host nation chasing a first major honour since the 1993 Copa, won in Ecuador.

The Albiceleste, stung by criticism of their opening 1-1 draw with Bolivia, have won a joint-record 14 titles along with Uruguay.

Home advantage, which had brought six Copas and also helped to propel Argentina to their maiden World Cup in 1978, should be like a 12th man.

The trouble is, where does their 10th man fit into the equation?

There are certain levels of footballing sacrilege in Argentina and slinging mud at 'El diez,' the number ten, ought to be well up the list.

A shirt worn by Diego Maradona is a sizeable garment to fill, and Brazilian successors to Pele will empathise entirely.

The unassuming Messi may not have the tousled curls of his predecessor, but he can point to his successes with Barcelona and his world player of the year status.

Yet the question is asked ever louder: Why can't Argentina win with the game's number one talent on board?

Sometimes, he is a victim of circumstances.

Five years ago, coach Jose Pekerman left him on the bench as Argentina exited the World Cup to Germany, when one moment of brilliance would have sufficed.

But then, in the 2007 Copa final, he was marked out of the game as Brazil cantered to a 3-0 victory in Venezuela.

And at last year's World Cup he was powerless to prevent a quarter-final thrashing by Germany.

This time, fans wonder if his presence is a potential solution -- or part of the problem. Opinions are divided.

"I don't think the national team should

play for Messi," midfield hope Javier Pastore told Ole in an interview published on Tuesday.

"We have to make use of the speed of others. It's not all about Messi. Yes, he is a plus for us as he is the best in the world -- but we have to function well as a unit."

Striker Sergio Aguero, who rescued a point with a fine volley against Bolivia, also has a view.

"People expect Leo to win matches on his own but there are 11 of us on the pitch," says Aguero.

Aguero suggests Argentine Football Association (AFA) president Julio Grondona had a point when he said after the first game that "Messi always plays well, never badly -- which is what the others around him were doing."

"As the ball did not get through to Messi, he had to drop back to pick it up," Grondona complained.

Aguero conceded that Messi "played well in the first game but he didn't succeed as we didn't turn in a good showing in general".

Dropping Messi would be a radical step, yet coach Sergio Batista has to weigh up whether he and Carlos Tevez are the attacking dream ticket.

The latter is a fan favourite and wears his heart on his sleeve, whereas the modest-to-a-fault Messi is regarded by some as barely Argentinian after moving to Catalonia as a young teenager.

To drop Tevez would be as sacrilegious in the eyes of many fans as to leave out Messi.

For now, Batista is adamant the pair can unlock the door with Ezequiel Lavezzi and Ever Banega providing additional thrust, adopting Andres Iniesta or Xavi-like roles to allow Messi to weave his tricks higher up the field as he does at the Camp Nou.

"The idea is for Lionel to link with Banega, (Esteban) Cambiasso and Tevez, and find a way through with Lavezzi," says Batista.

After Bolivia, Batista is aware that Colombia, who have three points in the bag after beating Costa Rica, "are slower but technically more gifted".

In a 4-1-4-1 system with Radamel Falcao a lone spearhead, they can afford to let Argentina run at them.

Chance to make amends Hunt on for Asian bargains

AFP, Santa Fe



Wednesday evening will see Argentina seek to make amends for their disappointing opening draw against Bolivia and target a place in the Copa America quarterfinals.

Lionel Messi and company, desperate to win a first major trophy for their country in 18 years, endured a torrid first 90 minutes at Friday's opener which left fans frustrated - though they were cheered up by the fact that eternal rivals and holders Brazil were unable to do any better against Venezuela.

After working their way through all the usual platitudes that "there are no

easy games at this level any more" the home contingent face Colombia in the central city of Santa Fe needing a win to recover their prestige and their composure.

Messi must meanwhile lay to rest questions as to why he cannot find his Barcelona form when playing for his country.

Coach Sergio Batista is not worried about his decision to persevere both with the Barca man and Carlos Tevez in attack.

"The idea is for Lionel to link with Banega, (Esteban) Cambiasso and Tevez, and find a way through with Lavezzi," says Batista, who insists his recipe will be palatable in the end.

Tevez, overshadowed by substitute and potential Manchester City replacement Sergio Aguero's fine equaliser

against the Bolivians, agrees and says Argentina know what they have to do.

"I think this match will be easier for us. We have to think about ourselves more than about Colombia.

"Today it's not easy to win against anyone," he warned in an interview with broadcaster C5N, but added the players are ready and clear about their roles.

"I've spoken with Batista and everything is crystal clear," he insisted.

The Albiceleste are looking for a record 15th Copa success to move ahead of Uruguay. To date the two-times World Cup winners have hosted the tournament eight times, winning six. The Uruguayans, who denied them on the other two occasions, have won seven out of seven home events.

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

Europe's wealthy football clubs are sniffing around the hottest young talent in Asia as they scour the worldwide transfer market for prospects that will not break the bank.

With many top sides baulking at hugely inflated prices for European players, clubs are realising there are still plenty of bargains to be had in Asia, which remains largely untapped despite some high-profile exports.

The success of Park Ji-Sung at Manchester United and Shinji Kagawa at Borussia Dortmund, and Japanese star Keisuke Honda's exploits at CSKA

Moscow have convinced European clubs that Asians can deliver.

Players from Asian champions Japan and South Korea, which boast the region's strongest domestic leagues, have inevitably been attracting the most interest from European suitors.

Last week, Bayern Munich snapped up Japanese starlet Takashi Usami, 19, on a one-year loan deal from J-League side Gamba Osaka with a view to a permanent deal.

The attacking midfielder-cum-striker won the J-League Young Player of the Year award last season, when he scored seven goals in 26 league matches.

Bayern will be hoping Usami has the same kind of impact his compatriot Kagawa has had at rivals and German champions Dortmund.

They signed the highly talented 22-year-old last year, taking advantage of a clause in his contract with Japanese club Cerezo Osaka that allowed him to move overseas for free.

Other players have inserted similar clauses into their contracts or simply moved abroad for free after their deals in Japan ended.

The attacking midfielder scored eight goals in 18 league games last season before breaking his foot and is just the latest in a long line of Japanese to successfully make the transition to German football.

A token sum of 350,000 euros (\$500,000) was paid in compensation by Dortmund to reflect the club's development of his talent.

Marking Messi pointless

AFP, Santa Fe



There is no point trying to man mark Lionel Messi and Colombia will not even try at their Copa America showdown on Wednesday, coach Hernan Dario 'Bolibollo' Gomez said Tuesday.

"I don't know how to go about marking Messi and that's the truth. We have our way of doing things, we have our system... the way we work is all about the ball and we mark the ball," insisted Gomez, whose men have the advantage of having beaten Costa Rica already while Argentina could only draw with Bolivia.

Colombia already have a foot therefore in the last eight while Argentina ponder how to improve their form with the world player of the year having struggled to find a way through against a resolute Bolivia defence.

Gomez says he will look at his own side's strengths rather than worry about his rivals.

"If I look at Argentina I'll go crazy if we start thinking about how to man mark Messi, (Carlos) Tevez, (Sergio) Aguero, (Angel) Di Maria. I have a style and one I am clear about and the team are gradually taking it on board, we are improving all the time," Gomez insisted.

A Colombian change will see Carlos Sanchez of Valenciennes come in for Tolima's Gustavo Bolivar.



Germany fans attend a women's World Cup match between England and Japan in Augsburg on Tuesday. England won 2-0. PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

Do you believe Stuart Law is good for the Bangladesh cricket team?

Yes 73.1%
No 26.9%

TOTAL VOTES: 167

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