

Second chance for Brazil

AFP, Campana



Brazil were a minute away from losing their Copa America group stage meeting with Paraguay before managing a draw to settle early nerves.

But striker Pato says Mano Menezes' side must pull their socks up and make no mistake Sunday at La Plata with the pair having been drawn to meet again in the quarterfinals.

Menezes spent part of Friday getting his reserve squad to mimic as near as possible Paraguay's style of play in training.

However, after the Brazilians finally "woke up" as their media put it in beating Ecuador to win Group B, they must start favourites with strikers Neymar and Alexandre Pato in their ranks.

Both netted twice against Ecuador - although Menezes will be aware that the Paraguayans are unlikely to allow them as much space coming forward.

Robinho and Ganso will be tasked with keeping the supply lines open to Neymar and Pato with Ramires and Lucas Leiva keeping things ticking over in the midfield engine room.

Pato says that Brazil must be ready from the first whistle - unlike last week, when Fred's last-gasp effort saved a 2-2 draw.

"It will be a tough game and different from the last one in that this time there is no margin for error.

"But we're confident we can win it," said the AC Milan forward.

Given the form of Neymar and Pato, the firepower issue is set to tip the balance away from the Paraguayans, particularly if the latters' Roque Santa Cruz, who netted in the

group match, is doubtful through injury after going off in the 3-3 thriller with Venezuela.

"We are hopeful," said coach Gerardo Martino on Friday. "We will give it another day and wait on the results of tests.

Blackburn's Santa Cruz, who after scoring in last week's encounter against the auriverde is his country's joint all-time top marksman with 25 goals, had to go off shortly before half-time against Venezuela after straining a leg muscle and was replaced by Nelson Haedo.

But Martino, who is due to step down after the tournament, is confident that his side has a good chance of reaching the last four as they look to secure a first Copa win since 1979.

"We traditionally do well against the stronger teams," he noted, adding that he believes Ganso, not Neymar, is the dangerman to keep a close watch on.

"It is very important that we don't give him any space," Martino warned.

While Paraguay fret over Santa Cruz, Brazil's injury worry is defender Thiago Silva, who has a similar problem and had a session with the physio rather than take part in the main training session Friday.

If the AC Milan star does not make it his place will go to Luizao or the less experienced David Luiz.

Brazil right-back Maicon has warned his teammates they have to keep on improving, having only shown flashes of their true talents in the final group game when the chips were down after two earlier draws.

"We know that we cannot just turn up and expect to win games because we are Brazil. We will only get the results we want if we are at our very best," he said.



Brazil forward Neymar (R) vies for the ball during a training session at Reserva Los Cardales on Friday. Brazil will face Paraguay in quarterfinals of Copa America on Sunday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Japan aim to end in style L'pool seal D's deal



Football

AFP, Frankfurt

Japan take on the USA in the women's World Cup final on Sunday bidding to finish the fairytale by lifting the trophy just four months after the earthquake which devastated their country.

The team's march to the final has been welcome news in a country struggling to recover from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, which ravaged the north-east coast and triggered the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

Despite their flower-inspired nickname Nadeshiko, the Japanese have been the giant-killers at Germany 2011: they shocked the hosts 1-0 in the quarterfinals and then dominated Sweden 3-1 in the semifinal.

Even Prime Minister Naoto Kan has admitted he will be cheering the team

come Sunday.

But they face a formidable challenge in the USA -- traditionally the super-power of women's football -- who are bidding for a third World Cup title after their victories in 1991 and 1999.

History is not on Japan's side: the Stars and Stripes having never lost to the Japanese in 25 meetings since 1986 with 22 wins to three draws, but coach Norio Sasaki says his team can beat the USA.

"It's definitely not impossible and it helped to win against Germany, it proved things like that are possible," he said.

"It gave additional power to the team. This is a once in a life-time chance to win this and beat the number one team in the world."

The Americans have already beaten Japan three times this year: a win at the Algarve Cup in March was followed up by two pre-World Cup warm-up victories on German soil.

After the March disaster, Japan has

won over many impartial observers here with their slick play and Sasaki says the goodwill has boosted his team.

"All the support from Japanese people world wide is empowering, it means a lot to us," he said.

Both sides have already lost in the tournament -- Japan were beaten 2-0 by England, while the USA went down 2-1 to Sweden in the group stages.

The USA showed their fighting spirit when striker Abby Wambach equalised against Brazil in the 122nd minute of their quarter-final, then held their nerve to beat the south Americans 5-3 in the penalty shoot-out.

Having also scored in the 3-1 semi-final win over France, Wambach is hitting form at the right time, but Japan captain Homare Sawa is the lynchpin which fires their attack, something USA coach Pia Sundhage knows all too well.

"She is a very good player, good on both sides of the ball," said Sundhage.



Football

AFP, Liverpool

England winger Stewart Downing completed his £20 million (\$32 million) transfer from Aston Villa to Liverpool on Friday after passing a medical, the Anfield giants announced.

The 26-year-old, who has played 27 times for England, becomes Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish's fourth major signing of the summer following Jordan Henderson, Charlie Adam and Alexander Doni.

"It's a great feeling and I'm very happy to be here," Downing told www.liverpoolfc.tv.

"It's been a long time coming and I've had to wait a few weeks, but I'm really pleased to be here.

"With the tradition, the manager and the players they have here, there was a big temptation to come and once I knew of their interest, there was only one place I wanted to go."

Liverpool are believed to have paid £20

million (\$32 million) for the winger after Villa had already rejected bids of £12 million (\$19.3 million) and £15 million (\$24.2 million).

Now Downing is determined to repay Dalglish's faith in bringing him to Merseyside.

"It would be nice to win something. I'm sure that's the same objective for everyone, not just me personally," he said.

"My aim is to be in the team, to play well and give something back because the manager has pushed the boat out to get me here, so hopefully I can give him something back."

Earlier Friday, Liverpool signed Brazilian goalkeeper Doni from Roma on a free transfer. The 31-year-old will act as understudy to the Reds' Spanish first-choice Jose Reina.

Director of football Damien Comolli admitted it was essential to sign a more experienced deputy for Reina.

"We are delighted to sign Doni," said Comolli. "We are getting a very experienced goalkeeper who is used to handling the pressure of big games and international matches with Brazil.

Mancini after Agüero

AFP, London

Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has confirmed his interest in Atletico Madrid striker Sergio Agüero and also hopes to sign Arsenal midfielder Samir Nasri by the end of July.

Mancini is aware that City captain Carlos Tevez is desperate to leave Eastlands and the Italian admitted on Saturday that Agüero would be the ideal replacement for his fellow Argentine international.

Agüero, 23, has already made it clear he would be willing to move to the Premier League and, with Chelsea and Real Madrid also interested in the forward, Mancini is ready to swoop first if Tevez leaves.

City are understood to want in the region of £50 million (\$80.6 million) for Tevez and have turned down a bid of £40 million (\$64.5 million) from Brazilian side Corinthians, while Juventus are also in the race.

Mancini told Sky Sports News: "Agüero is a player that can play for Manchester City because he is young and he is a good player like Carlos.

He can score a lot of goals and can play with Mario (Balotelli), with Edin (Dzeko)... it could be (that he joins)."

Mancini's spending will not end there if the ambitious Italian gets his way as he is also keen to tie up a deal for Nasri.

N Korea quintet test positive

AFP, Frankfurt

Football's governing body FIFA revealed on Saturday that a total of five members of the North Korea team tested positive for a banned anabolic steroid at the women's World Cup.

After defenders Song Jong-Sun and Jong Pok-Sim both tested positive for a banned anabolic steroid before the North Koreans' final group game, FIFA had the entire squad tested and three more players also failed tests.

Arsenal eye Campbell

AFP, San Jose

Premier League giants Arsenal are keen on signing promising 19-year-old Costa Rica striker Joel Campbell, local media reported on Friday.

The daily Al Dia said that the London club's scout for the Concacaf region, Richard Law, had arrived in the Central American country accompanied by the agent Joaquim Batista, supposedly with the aim of sealing a deal for Campbell, who plays for Deportivo Saprissa in San Jose.

"Once we have spoken with Saprissa, we will be able to give more information," Batista was quoted as saying.



Chile players (bottom to top) Alexis Sanchez, Matias Fernandez, Rodrigo Millar and Carlos Carmona take part in a training session in Mendoza on Friday. Chile will play Venezuela in their Copa America quarterfinal on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Chile chase maiden crown

AFP, San Juan



Chile are straining every sinew to land a first Copa America crown after the frustration of four losing finals - while Sunday rivals Venezuela are happy to have emerged from group play.

The Chileans, led by the stylish Alexis Sanchez, have been playing some fine football at the event and won Group C with something to spare.

But before they can even start dreaming about the trophy match there is the small matter of Sunday's quarterfinal against their surprise opponents to deal with.

Chile coach Claudio Borghi is not alone in having been impressed by the skill, as well as the tenacity, of the Vinotinto, whom they face at San Juan in what is almost a home match for his side.

"Everyone's changed the way they look at the Venezuelans... they have progressed a lot," said Borghi, in looking back at the not-so-distant past where Venezuela would be a team to bolster one's goal difference against with three points a virtual formality.

The Chileans have not forgotten that in the last World Cup qualifying round - in which they placed second only to Brazil - the Venezuelans held them to a 2-2 draw in Santiago.

Striker Esteban Paredes says that "we shan't be underestimating them. For me they played better than Brazil in the three group games. I think we are in for a tough but attractive game."

The Venezuelans only ceded top spot in Group B to Brazil on goal difference.

Chilean injury doubts centre upon Gonzalo Jara and Luis Jimenez, as well as Matias Fernandez, still labouring with the leg injury which forced him to limp out of the group game with Mexico and not expected to feature.

Midfielder Jimenez has a slight inflammation of the groin but hopes to make the match while defender Jara is also intending to be fit despite a throat infection.

With Jean Beausejour suspended after his red card against Peru, Carlos Carmona will cover in midfield.

The Venezuelans may be forgiven for thinking they have done all that can be expected of them after reaching the quarters for the second successive time and first on foreign soil.

But striker Grenddy Perozo, whose header rescued a 3-3 draw with Paraguay after a late fightback, says that there is no reason to stop the adventure here.

"Now for Chile. They are a pretty good side but we have managed to get results against them before now so why not this time," Perozo said.

For coach Cesar Farias, the secret is their staying power.

"We may not be great, but this team fights - we are Venezuelans," said Farias after his men rescued a point to push Paraguay into third place and preserve their unbeaten record.

A decade ago the Venezuelans were cast in the cannon fodder role after losing 7-0 to Brazil.

But those days are gone, says Farias. "We can win, lose or draw - but with respect. We want more," he says.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Which Copa America team has impressed you the most?

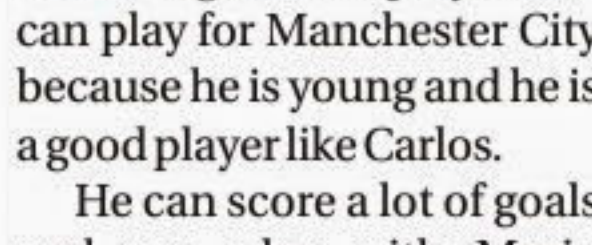
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