

Barcelona return to training

AFP, Barcelona

Spanish and European champions Barcelona began their pre-season training on Monday with just their Argentinian and Brazilian players who took part in the Copa America missing.

Andres Iniesta, Xavi, Carles Puyol and Gerard Pique were among the 18 Barca players who took part in a light training session after completing physical tests.

Puyol, who underwent an operation in June on his left knee to remove loose cartilage, will work on building up muscle strength this week and did not appear on the field, the club said in a statement.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola will give his first press conference of the 2011-12 season after Tuesday's morning training session.

Barca's Argentine players Lionel Messi and his teammates Gabriel Milito and Javier Mascherano along with the club's Brazilian players Daniel Alves and Adriano have been given extended leave to take part in the Copa America.



Barcelona players stretch during their first training session of the season at the Joan Gamper Sports Center on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Quake videos inspired Japan

AFP, Tokyo

The Japanese women's team watched disturbing videos of areas of the country ravaged by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami to inspire them to their historic victory at the World Cup in Germany.

"We were kind of moved to tears by watching the DVDs," captain Homare Sawa said as the team returned to a hero's welcome in Tokyo on Tuesday.

"While we were privileged to play football, we really felt like bringing smiles and spirits back to Japan," added the 32-year-old playmaker, saying the squad watched the videos between training sessions.

The team, nicknamed Nadeshiko after a pink flower seen in Japan as a symbol of feminine beauty and grace, came from behind twice to beat the two-time champions United States on penalties in the final on Sunday in Frankfurt.

"We had support from many people. We thought we should bring power and energy back to those disaster-hit people in return," said Sawa.

Villa snap up Given

AFP, London

Aston Villa on Monday announced the signing of experienced Irish goalkeeper Shay Given on a five-year contract from Premier League rivals Manchester City.

The 35-year-old, who arrived for an undisclosed fee, is Villa coach Alex McLeish's first signing since he succeeded Gerard Houllier at the end of last season.

"Aston Villa is a huge club and I'm really excited to be joining," Given told the Villa website.

"It's a new challenge and I'm eager to embrace it."

Given joined City from Newcastle United for £7 million (\$11.2m) in 2009 but has spent much of his time on the bench after City coach Roberto Mancini decided to make England international Joe Hart his first-choice goalkeeper.

The Irishman, his country's most capped player with 113 appearances, will replace American goalkeeper Brad Friedel, who left Villa for Tottenham Hotspur in June after three years at the Midlands club.

"Shay has come here with something of a point to prove and that won't do him any harm at all," said McLeish.

Not a superstar at home No need to panic

AFP, Rosario



Hours after Argentina's national side slid out to neighbours Uruguay at the Copa America, Lionel Messi headed back almost unnoticed to his home town of Rosario.

Despite his being the world footballer of the year, it was a low-key homecoming for the Barcelona man - but that was for the better, particularly after another unspectacular showing in the national shirt.

In truth, locals hardly seemed to notice the whole event after the Argentine Football Association decided it should pass them by.

A handful of youngsters, sporting Brazil starlet Neymar's spectacularly spiky haircut, possibly had an inkling, but most locals seemed more interested in queuing up to see the final Harry Potter movie.

Retail outlet Jose's Bridal Wear did make a little concession to the event's existence, draping an Argentinian flag among silken wedding gowns.

Organisers decided that the Copa should go on the road, with only the July 24 final to be played in the capital Buenos Aires.

Yet while the albiceleste appeared at La Plata near the capital, as well as the provincial towns of Santa Fe and Cordoba, they shunned the one place

where the neutral might expect support to be at its most raucous -- Messi's old haunt, Rosario.

It was in this city four hours northwest of Buenos Aires that Argentina laid the foundations for their first World Cup triumph in 1978, playing the second phase there.

But with local politicians at La Plata having had a new stadium constructed less than a decade ago, that venue made the cut and Rosario missed out.

Strangely, to the outside observer, local fans seemed unconcerned about not seeing Messi.

The 24-year-old left for Barcelona as a young teen and a straw poll of residents gave credence to the view that he may be the world's best player, but he is not really one of theirs.

"Well he never played for Rosario, did he? I mean we see all the goals he scored for Barcelona, but when does he score for Argentina? Sergio Aguero and Angel Di Maria did most of the scoring," complained Aline, a young woman selling leather goods and metal straws through which locals sip mate tea.

But is Messi not a local boy made good?

"Well I see they just put up a statue to Riquelme at Boca Juniors. But he's identified with Boca," replied Aline.

"Messi we don't really identify with Rosario -- he never played for

them. They couldn't afford the treatment," she stressed, referring to the treatment Messi required for stunted growth as a boy.

Barca footed the bill and the rest is history.

"This is more a city for art and culture. I mean we have statues -- to (musicians) Fitor Paez and Juan Carlos Baglietto, writer Fontana Rosa.

"But one for Messi? I don't see that -- or even one for (Diego) Maradona."

One who does make it into Rosario's statue hall of fame is another former resident who left as a youngster and whose face is at least as recognisable as Messi's -- revolutionary Che Guevara, who left as a child in a bid to cure his asthma.

Copa America organising committee chairman Luis Meisner suggests Messi "is a sportsman who has triumphed abroad and is not (properly) recognised in his own country," while local journalist Lalo Falcioni told AFP: "Messi is not identified with the city."

Argentina could have done with much more of his star quality as they look back on another failed attempt to end an 18-year trophy drought.

But if you want magic in Rosario, forget Messi.

Better to head to the Monumental Cinema -- ironic, when the Copa final will be played at Buenos Aires' Monumental Stadium -- for some of the Harry Potter variety.

AFP, Campana



Brazil coach Mano Menezes insisted on Monday that there was no need to panic after his side lost their

Copa America quarterfinal shoot-out to Paraguay.

The media were scathing after a poor match ended goalless following extra-time and lambasted the auriverde for contriving to miss all four of their penalties.

"I know you live and die by results," said Menezes. "But these will come if we continue on the path we are on."

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) will allow him to stay at the helm through to 2014, president Ricardo Teixeira said in an overnight statement from Rio.

"There is not much time to cry over the Copa America elimination," said Teixeira, adding that Brazil had been unlucky to crash out.

Teixeira said he had phoned Menezes to underline that the "project to renew the Brazilian team with the principal objective -- the 2014 World Cup -- remains in place".

Menezes said the Paraguay game had to be forgotten.

"Of course if we keep raking over the four missed penalties that saw us go out then we will not talk about the game we played, which marked an evolution in the team and the squad," Menezes told a news conference.

The team had struggled to draws against Venezuela and Paraguay in the first phase before an improved performance saw them beat Ecuador 4-2 and allowed them to qualify for the last eight as Group B winners.

However, hope among fans that that improvement would continue into the

knockout stages was quickly crushed and overall the impression left was of a patchy side with some fine approach play but a lack of end-product.

Menezes did insist, however, that they were on the right track to shine where he wants them to -- at the 2014 World Cup they will host.

"The players are preparing to create the Brazil side which we all want. They are valued, respected and require respect at a most difficult moment.

"There can be criticism but it must be accompanied by respect and when that is lacking then we cannot reach the place where we need to be."

He admitted that the modern game had seen smaller fry such as Venezuela catch up the big fish.

"Football today is evolving very much. When people talked about (Brazil not beating) Venezuela there was much criticism. But now Venezuela are through to the semifinals. That is no accident."

And he said that Brazil were victims of wanting to stay true to their attacking philosophy.

"It is different to defend for 90 minutes than to attack for 90 minutes. Uruguay will never play like Brazil -- and Brazil will never play like Uruguay," who adopted a more cautious approach to see off Argentina, also on penalties.

Menezes had previously blamed the pitch for the spot-kick fiasco but admitted there was really no excuse for a top side to miss four penalties out of four.

He concluded, however, that the Copa experience would serve as just another section on the learning curve leading to the World Cup, when failure really will not be tolerated.

Batista's job safe

AFP, Buenos Aires



Argentina said on Monday they would keep Sergio Batista on as coach despite their early Copa America exit.

The 14-times champions lost a quarterfinal to Uruguay, now going for a 15th title, on a penalty shoot-out.

But Humberto Grondona, sub-director of team affairs at the Argentine Football Association and the son of AFA president Julio Grondona, said the organisation would keep faith in the man who only officially replaced Diego Maradona six months ago.

There will be no "brusque changes - we never thought of going down that road," said Humberto Grondona in an interview with Radio La Red.

"The technical staff have to have sufficient wisdom to draw conclusions" from the Copa failure to end a trophy drought stretching back to 1993.

"The future lies before us - the qualifiers (for the 2014 World Cup)," he added.

Batista has been vilified in the press for not seeming to know his best team - he chopped and changed after a poor start but still that did not prevent the Uruguay loss when Carlos Tevez missed the decisive spotkick to send the Uruguayans through a semifinal against Peru.

Batista must "protect himself and see which player is of no use to him," said Grondona junior.

"We hope he will change," he added.

Maradona, dumped after a World Cup quarterfinal thumping by Germany, was also criticised for using too many players but in any case had a poor relationship with Grondona senior.



Venezuela players practice during a training session in Mendoza on Monday. Venezuela play Paraguay in their Copa America semifinal on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

Which Copa America team has impressed you the most?

Brazil 42.0%

Chile 31.2%

Argentina 26.0%

TOTAL VOTES: 785

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