

Road to Brazil kicks off

AFP, Paris



The marathon South American World Cup qualifying campaign begins this Friday and the battle to join hosts Brazil in the first finals on the continent since 1978 looks set to be wide open.

Nine teams will face each other home and away over the next two years, with the top four all advancing automatically to the 2014 jamboree, while a fifth nation will take part in a playoff against Asian opposition.

Much of the focus will be on traditional powerhouses Argentina and Uruguay ahead of the opening games, albeit for different reasons.

Argentina are now rebuilding under new coach Alejandro Sabella after their disappointing showing at the recent Copa America on home soil.

The 56-year-old, who led Estudiantes to the Copa Libertadores title in 2009, replaced Sergio Batista, and must be aware that solving the Lionel Messi conundrum is crucial if he is to be accepted by a passionate public.

Uruguay must be considered the favourites on current form, as coach Oscar Washington Tabarez has done an extraordinary job of making the small nation of only 3.5 million people a footballing force once again.

La Celeste were World Cup semi-finalists in South Africa in 2010, before confirming that was no fluke by winning the Copa America in July, knocking out Argentina on the way to a final

in which they outclassed Paraguay.

However, Tabarez sought to ease the pressure on his squad by dismissing that favourites' tag.

"To think that we are better than other teams because of what we have achieved would be arrogant," he insists.

"We are going to start these qualifiers better than we have done in the past, with more time to work and with everyone in the squad knowing each other well, but in no way are we favourites."

Of the rest, Paraguay will be out to maintain their fantastic recent record in qualifying under a new coach in Francisco 'Chiqui' Arce, who represented his country in the 1998 and 2002 World Cups.

Argentine Gerardo Martino stepped down after leading his adopted nation to the final of the Copa America despite not winning a single game in open play in Argentina.

Chile remain one of the most attractive footballing sides on the international stage, although Claudio Borghi's side must begin their campaign without star man Alexis Sanchez of Barcelona due to injury.

All the other nations have reason to believe that they can qualify too, with Colombia -- led by prolific striker Radamel Falcao -- hoping for a fresh start under new coach Leonel Alvarez.

He was appointed after predecessor Hernan Dario Gomez resigned in the wake of allegations that he attacked a woman who insulted him in a bar.

Peru finished bottom in qualifying

for the 2010 finals, but have been galvanised by their impressive run to the Copa semifinals, achieved without injured stars Cladio Pizarro and Jefferson Farfan, while neighbours Ecuador are a pale shadow of the side that reached the last 16 in Germany in 2006.

They will get the chance to avenge a defeat to Venezuela at the Copa America when they host the Vino Tinto at altitude in Quito.

Traditionally a footballing back-water, Venezuela have improved rapidly in recent years, and Cesar Farias' team captured the imagination of a nation as they reached the Copa semi-finals for the first time.

Venezuela's strength in depth was proven by Farias' decision to name two separate squads for his side's opening two games.

Only nine players are included in both squads as Venezuela first face Ecuador at altitude and then Argentina at home.

And then there is Bolivia, perceived to be the weakest side, but with one big ally: the altitude of La Paz.

There Bolivia play their home games 3,650 metres above sea level, and their 6-1 win over Argentina in 2010 qualifying proved just how big an advantage that can be.

That means that even the poorest-performing side at the Copa America can dream of reaching the finals, even if away from home their lack of quality is likely to be exposed.



PHOTO: AFP

Uruguay star Diego Forlan is about to throw the ball during a training session in Canelones on Monday. Uruguay will face Bolivia in a 2014 World Cup qualifier on Friday.

France recall Cisse

AFP, Paris

Lazio striker Djibril Cisse and Valencia defender Jeremy Mathieu were both called up on Tuesday by France coach Laurent Blanc for two crucial Euro 2012 qualifiers.

Group D leader's France have two remaining qualifiers, against Albania on Friday and the potential table-topping decider against Bosnia-Herzegovina next Tuesday.

Cisse and Mathieu have been drafted in as back-up to the 23-man squad after injuries to midfielders Franck Ribery (both calves) and Blaise Matuidi (left thigh) and striker Karim Benzema (groin).

Striker Kevin Gameiro will miss the Albania game with an inflamed knee while defender Eric Abidal is uncertain with a thigh strain.

Arsenal defender Bacary Sagna had already been forced to withdraw with a broken leg he suffered in Sunday's Premier League defeat by Spurs.

Cisse, who has scored nine goals and has 40 caps for France, has not played for the national side since their disastrous 2010 World Cup campaign.

Shearer backs Carroll

AFP, London



Former England captain Alan Shearer is confident that £35 million Liverpool striker Andy Carroll has the ability to forge a successful career for club and country.

Shearer told several newspapers on Tuesday that the 22-year-old former Newcastle centre-forward would overcome a slow start to his Anfield career and establish himself in the England team.

Carroll has struggled to live up to his price tag since joining Liverpool from the Magpies in January, scoring only once this season in the league while facing criticism over his lifestyle from England manager Fabio Capello.

But Shearer is adamant that Carroll is on the right path to success and believes he will benefit at Liverpool from the guidance of Kenny Dalglish.

"Andy is a young and inexperienced lad with a lot of pressure on him but he will come good," added Shearer, who played under Dalglish at Blackburn during the mid-1990s.

"Yes, there will be times when people question him but he's at the right club. At Anfield, he's got a great manager who understands the trials and tribulations of being a young footballer.

"When I moved to Blackburn, I had great guidance there and that was Kenny. Kenny will protect him and look after him as he did me at Blackburn. He did that in a fantastic way.

"Once he settles down, starts to play well and score, you will see the fearsome centre forward that we saw at Newcastle and you'll see the reason why Kenny paid £35 million for him.

"Andy is talented. He is a nightmare for defenders to play against if given the right service and if he is fit enough."

Shearer said he expected Carroll to cement a partnership with Wayne Rooney in the England set-up.

Messi wants to set things right

INTERNET



Barcelona ace Lionel Messi admits the Argentina national team has experienced a "great number of failures" during his time with the squad so far.

Messi, who has won several major trophies in club football with Barca, is widely regarded as the world's best footballer and was expected to help Argentina win its first major title in 18 years as hosts of this year's Copa America.

However, the hosts crashed out at the quarterfinal stage to eventual champions Uruguay and Messi has urged his teammates to set things right ahead of the start of their Conmebol World Cup qualifying campaign.

Alejandro Sabella's Argentina side start their bid for Brazil 2014 at home against Chile on Friday before travelling to Venezuela the following Tuesday.

"The results we seek are still not materialising for us, we have experienced a great

SQUAD

Goalkeepers:
Sergio Romero (Sampdoria/ITA), Mariano Andujar (Catania/ITA), Agustin Orion (Boca Juniors).

Defenders:
Pablo Zabaleta (Manchester City/ENG), Nicolas Burdisso (Roma/ITA), Federico Fernandez (Napoli/ITA), Martin Demichelis (Malaga/ESP), Nicolas Otamendi (Porto/POR), Nicolas Pareja, Marcos Rojo (both Spartak Moscow/RUS), Emiliano Insua (Sporting Lisbon/POR)

Midfielders:
Ever Banega (Valencia/ESP), Fabian Rinaudo (Sporting Lisbon/POR), Ricardo Alvarez (Inter Milan/ITA), Jonas Gutierrez (Newcastle/ENG), Jose Sosa (Metallist/UKR), Javier Pastore (PSG/FRA), Angel Di Maria (Real Madrid/ESP), Javier Mascherano (Barcelona/ESP), Rodrigo Brama (Estudiantes de La Plata).

Forwards:
Nicolas Gaitan (Benfica/POR), Lionel Messi (Barcelona/ESP), Gonzalo Higuain (Real Madrid/ESP), Sergio Aguero (Manchester City/ENG), Rodrigo Palacio (Genoa/ITA), Eduardo Salvio

number of failures," Messi told Radio Metro.

"I hope that against Chile we can start winning."

Messi also warned the public that they should not expect him to carry Argentina on his back as he predicts qualification from South America's World Cup section to be very competitive.

"These games are getting more and more difficult because all the teams are on a similar level, and they can make life hard for you by packing the midfield," he said.

Messi's failure to inspire Argentina to success as he has done numerous times with his club side Barca has been a regular source for the player's detractors to reference.

Interestingly, Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi's main rival for the FIFA Ballon D'Or, has also struggled to perform consistently for his national side Portugal.

Comparisons between the two players have dogged the pair ever since they emerged as perennial football stars on the global stage.

IN brief

Rodwell gets reprieve

AFP, London

Everton midfielder Jack Rodwell has successfully appealed against the red card issued to him in last weekend's Merseyside derby with Liverpool, the FA confirmed on Tuesday.

Rodwell was controversially sent off by referee Martin Atkinson after a 23rd minute challenge on Liverpool's Uruguayan striker Luis Suarez despite winning the ball cleanly.

Rodwell's match tilted the game in Liverpool's favour, with the Reds going on to win 2-0 at Goodison.

The three-match suspension against Rodwell has been scrapped in light of the successful appeal, an FA statement said.

Italy lose Criscito

AFP, Rome

Zenit Saint Petersburg defender Domenico Criscito has been ruled out of Italy's two remaining Euro 2012 qualifiers with a groin strain, the Italian football federation announced on Tuesday.

Palermo defender Federico Balzaretti and Inter Milan striker Giampaolo Pazzini are also doubtful for the ties against Serbia and Northern Ireland because of injury.

Italy have already booked their spot for the tournament in Poland and Ukraine next year as Group C winners but both their opponents are still in contention for second place and a spot in the play-offs.

Italy travel to Belgrade on Friday and host Northern Ireland at Pescara next Tuesday.

Afellaysideline

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Dutch international Ibrahim Afellay will be sidelined for about six months after he underwent surgery to repair a torn ligament in his left knee, the Spanish club said Tuesday.

The 25-year-old, who signed with Barcelona from PSV Eindhoven in December, picked up the injury during a training session on September 22. He underwent the 50-minute operation at a Barcelona hospital on Monday.

"During the first two months he will undergo physiotherapy and work on mobility. The third and fourth month is a very active phase, mainly in the gym," one of the doctors who operated on the player, Ricard Pruna, was quoted by the club's website as saying.

"In the fifth and sixth month he will do exercises adapted to the pitch," he added. Afellay had only just got back into Pep Guardiola's line-up after missing the start of the season with a hamstring injury.

He has played just a substitute's role this sea-



England strikers Wayne Rooney (R) and Andy Carroll do warm-up exercise during a training session in London Colney yesterday. England are due to play Montenegro in a Euro 2012 qualifier on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

SPORTS POLL

Who will WI miss most?

Chris Gayle 81.4%
Shiv Chanderpaul 8.8%
Dwayne Bravo 6.2%

TOTAL VOTES: 113

WEEKLY QUESTION

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