



Colombian pop star Shakira performs during the opening of the Olympic stadium in Kiev on Sunday. The stadium is set to host the final of the Euro 2012 soccer tournament.

PHOTO:
REUTERS

Messi issue laid to rest

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

New Argentina coach Alex Sabella says his side have laid their Lionel Messi "psychosis" to rest after opening their World Cup qualifying campaign with a 4-1 win over Chile on Friday.

Barcelona superstar Messi was at his majestic best following on from some below-par showings in the national shirt - scoring once in a display which saw the Argentinians cast off the demons of a failed July Copa America campaign on home turf.

Messi, who scored goals for fun as Barcelona terrorised teams at home and in Europe all season, cut a dejected figure at the Copa, save for a fine group phase showing against Costa Rica, and that prompted some observers to ask if he would ever really fit into the national team.

But after his performance on Friday Sabella insisted things were now clicking.

"This goal will be important for Lionel to lay to rest this apparent collective psychosis that he can't do the business with Argentina," said Sabella, who succeeded Sergio Batista after the Copa America.

"But this (scoring) is not a worry anyway as he is always extraordinary and if he does not score he comes up with the move which enables someone else to," Sabella observed.

Messi notched the second goal and was generally a thorn in Chilean flesh although many of the plaudits went to Gonzalo Higuain, the Real Madrid striker netting a hat-trick at the Estadio Monumental in Buenos Aires.

Before the match Sabella had praised Messi effusively, saying of his captain: "In general terms, Messi never plays badly. The only thing is that you always have to evaluate his performances in a general context.

"There are many games in which Messi has shone for Argentina, but because he hasn't perhaps been decisive people are left thinking that he has not played as well."

Tepid Brazil hit hard

AFP

Brazil's 1-0 victory over Costa Rica in a friendly international on Friday failed to impress critics back home, who expected more from the 2014 World Cup hosts.

"Drowsy Brazil beat Costa Rica," was the verdict of O Globo newspaper on the performance of Mano Menezes' side.

"Without playing well, Brazil beat Costa Rica 1-0 with a goal by Neymar after an hour of mediocre football in the rain," the newspapers said.

Sports daily Lance was similarly unimpressed, calling the football on display "without imagination, without anything very interesting."

With no qualifying campaign for the 2014 World Cup as the host nation, Brazil elected to begin their build-up in Central America.

While the Brazilian players were followed like rock stars since arriving in Costa Rica, it was the hosts who had the first chance of the match, but Winston Parks was unable to finish.

Despite their desultory play, it was Brazil who seized the lead in the 59th minute when substitute Daniel Alves' cross to Fred bounced to Neymar, who slotted the ball in from close range.

"We didn't play at the highest level, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Although one goal isn't a lot, it was enough to get the victory," Menezes said.

His side will face a tougher test on Tuesday when they take on 2011 Gold Cup champions Mexico in another friendly.

Shakira glams up troubled arena

Football

AFP, Kiev

Colombian pop sensation Shakira joined forces with Ukraine president Viktor Yanukovich and 60,000 spectators as the covers came off Kiev's troubled Euro 2012 Olympiysky stadium on Saturday in a politically-tinged opening.

"With this stadium, Ukraine will organise a worthy Euro 2012," said Yanukovich of a ground which will host five matches, including the July 1 final, at the championships being co-hosted with Poland, but which has been dogged by construction delays and accusations of corruption.

Yanukovich, whose popularity ratings have plummeted, was jeered as he spoke while the festivities were also held up by three naked female demonstrators who ran onto the pitch to demand a "Euro 2012 without prostitution."

The FEMEN pressure group believe that the tournament will encourage sex tourism in the financially struggling country.

Shakira, who also featured at the opening of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, performed for 40 minutes, singing the official song from last year's football showpiece, "WakaWaka".

Against a background of fireworks, more than 2,000 artists put on a show with Ukraine

folklore at its heart.

The stadium was scheduled to be completed in June, but work on the 585 million euro renovations was delayed, a factor which caused UEFA to air their concerns to local organisers.

There were even threats to strip Ukraine of its hosting rights.

"If there is no stadium in Kiev, there is no Euro in Ukraine," said UEFA president Michel Platini during a visit to the former Soviet republic in April 2010.

But by September 26 this year, Platini had altered his opinion, claiming he was "completely reassured" by the state of preparations in the country's four host cities Kiev, Kharkiv, Donetsk and Lviv.

The stadium was built in 1923, briefly carrying the name of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, before he fell from grace and was assassinated on Stalin's orders in 1940.

Kiev's ground was later dedicated to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and also hosted matches in the 1980 Olympics' football tournament.

Work on the ground for Euro 2012 began three years ago with around 2,000 workers employed on the site.

But it has continued to be a source of controversy with opposition figures in the country claiming a lack of transparency in financial arrangements and that the costs were too high.

Germany rest Gotze

AP, Dusseldorf

Germany coach Joachim Loew has excused midfielder Mario Gotze for the side's final European Championship qualifier against Belgium on Tuesday.

The German football federation says Loew decided to give Gotze a break ahead of the 19-year-old's upcoming games for Borussia Dortmund.

Midfielders Ilkay Guendogan and Toni Kroos joined Germany's squad on Saturday.

Defender Jerome Boateng, striker Miroslav Klose and midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger could only complete light individual training on Sunday.

Germany tops Group A and has already qualified for next year's tournament.

Second placed Belgium needs to win to secure a playoff place ahead of Turkey, which is one point behind and hosts Azerbaijan.

'England not good enough'

REUTERS, London



England are not good enough to win Euro 2012 because the players have "no mobility and can't keep the ball" according to former England defender Gary Neville.

Neville, the former Manchester United and England right-back who won 85 England caps and retired earlier this year, also said Wayne Rooney's sending off in Friday's 2-2 draw with Montenegro should not deflect attention away from what he sees as the team's real problems.

England, who sealed their place with Friday's draw, will start the tournament without Rooney, who will be suspended for at least one match.

"It's as though we think one world class player might be able to propel us to a major trophy," Neville, writing in the Mail on Sunday, said.

"And now we are talking about Rooney possibly missing two games at Euro 2012 when what we should be talking about is the spine of a team that has no mobility and can't keep the ball.

"When I look at it coldly, a team that has John Terry, Gary Cahill, Scott Parker, Gareth Barry, Darren Bent and Rooney in its central

positions is nowhere near good enough to take on the major nations such as Spain.

"I'm not having a go at individuals; there are some very good players among those names. Collectively, Rooney aside, there is hardly any pace, very little invention and hardly any rotation of positions.

"The real issue is that the spine of the team is not good enough, as it stands, to take on Spain, Italy, France or Germany at Euro 2012." England play world champions Spain in a friendly at Wembley on Nov. 12 and Neville says because of the players the visitors have, the match is very important.

"Compare (England) with the spine of Spain: Carles Puyol, Gerard Pique, Xabi Alonso, Xavi, David Villa and Fernando Llorente. That's the issue Fabio Capello now has to resolve and why the Wembley friendly is so much more than a practice.

"Never has a friendly been more important. "It's like a Cup final. Somehow, Capello has to do something that no England manager has done in 15 years, and that is make the England players believe that this next match could be the most important of their life."

Spain, the reigning European champions, have also qualified for the finals along with England, Italy, Germany, Netherlands and co-hosts Poland and Ukraine.

All 16 qualifiers will be known by next month.

AFRICAN NATIONS CUP Nigeria, S Africa fall by wayside

Football

REUTERS, Kitwe

Nigeria and South Africa were among the heavyweight casualties on the penultimate day of African Nations Cup qualifying as Angola, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Tunisia, Zambia and Niger all made it through to next year's tournament.

War-torn Libya also qualified as one of the two best runners-up but they will not be joined by Nigeria after Guinea scored a 95th minute equaliser to draw 2-2 in Abuja.

The late goal sparked a huge riot in the ground and policemen and related security agents had a hectic time curtailing the rage of the angry football fans.

Seething with rage after referee Doue Normandez blew the final whistle to end the game, the Nigerian fans vented their anger on the floppy Eagles, throwing satchets of pure water, stones and eggs at the players who were shielded by heavily-armed policemen.

The last time Nigeria did not qualify for the competition was in 1986 when the tourney was staged in Egypt.

South Africa also failed to qualify after being held to a goalless home draw by Sierra Leone which left them level on points with their opponents and Niger in Group G.

Niger, who lost 3-0 in Egypt, finished top of a mini league table of head-to-head results between the three countries to qualify for the finals for the first time.

The other spot reserved for second-placed finishers in the four team groups will be decided on Sunday when the last set of matches are played. Sudan are best placed after Saturday's matches despite losing 2-0 at home to Ghana.

Botswana, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast and Senegal had already qualified before the weekend matches for the Jan. 21 to Feb. 12 finals being co-hosted by Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.



German midfielder Sami Khedira (L) balances a rugby ball on his head during a training session in Dusseldorf on Sunday. Germany face Belgium in their final Euro 2012 qualifier on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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