

Italy, Germany aim for improvement

AFP, Paris

Italy and Germany are Europe's most successful teams when it comes to winning the World Cup, but both sides will be keen to improve on their opening qualifying performances for 2014 in Tuesday's second batch of games.

Neither lost - Italy came away with a 2-2 draw in Bulgaria while Germany beat minnows Faroe Islands 3-0 - but they were a long way from the impressive sides that met in the Euro semifinals in June and which saw the Italians prevail 2-1.

The Italians - who went on to lose 4-0 to Spain in the final - shouldn't face too many problems at home to Malta in Modena.

However, with a group also comprising fellow Euro 2012 finalists Denmark and Czech Republic they will need a comprehensive victory to help their goal difference ahead of tougher tasks.

Their veteran goalkeeper and captain Gianluigi Buffon acknowledges that he and his team-mates must shake off a habit of starting qualifying slowly - an opinion echoed by their coach Cesare Prandelli.

"It's been said we'll make a lot of changes, but the most important thing is for us to play quality football," said Prandelli, who will be without influential midfielder Daniele di Rossi for the Maltese encounter.

"We are Italy, and we must characterise something more than a simple tactical model.

"We have to rediscover our identity for Tuesday."

The Germans confidence has taken a knock with the defeat by Italy then a 3-1 reverse to Argentina in a friendly.

Their coach Joachim Loew admitted that he was looking for a sharper effort in front of goal on a potentially tricky trip to neighbours Austria in Vienna.

"Austria will of course want to win, so it will be a totally different type of game," said Loew, whose side only converted three of their 15 chances against the Faroes.

"And it will be anything other than easy, the Austrians are stronger than they have been for years.

"They will want to make our lives far from easy."

Elsewhere defending champions and two-time European champions Spain get their campaign underway with what should be a routine win away against Georgia while Didier Deschamps will be looking for France to put some pressure on the Spanish by making it two wins from two at home to Belarus.

Deschamps, appointed after fellow World Cup and Euro winning hero Laurent Blanc stepped down after a disappointing Euro 2012 campaign ended in defeat to Spain, admitted the 1-0 win over Finland had given them just the momentum they required.

However, while Belarus opened with a 1-0 away loss to Georgia, Deschamps will need no reminding that they pulled off a shock 1-0 win at the Stade de France against the French in their Euro 2012 qualifier.

"It is good to play straight after beating Finland," said Deschamps.

"Belarus lost to Georgia. We will enjoy the win over the Finns but prepare meticulously for the Belarus game."

The one European giant that did come away with a convincing win from their first game was England - 5-0 winners away to Moldova - but they will face a sterner test at home to Euro 2012 co-hosts Ukraine.

The English scraped a fortunate 1-0 win over the Ukrainians at Euro but coach Roy Hodgson will hope a combination of home advantage and the win over the Moldovans will see them win more handily this time round.

FIXTURES

Tuesday

(kick-offs all GMT):

(1830) Serbia v Wales, (1845) Belgium v Croatia, (1900) Scotland v Macedonia, (1800) Bulgaria v Armenia, (1845) Italy v Malta, (1830) Sweden v Kazakhstan, (1835) Austria v Germany, (1730) Romania v Andorra, (1800) Turkey v Estonia, (1930) Hungary v Netherlands, (1700) Cyprus v Iceland, (1800) Norway v Slovenia, (1830) Switzerland v Albania, (1700) Israel v Russia, (1845) Northern Ireland v Luxembourg, (1915) Portugal v Azerbaijan, (1815) Slovakia v Liechtenstein, (1800) Bosnia-Herzegovina v Latvia, (1845) Greece v Lithuania, (1830) St Marino v Montenegro, (1845) Poland v Moldova, (1900) England v Ukraine, (1730) Georgia v Spain, (1900)



PHOTO: AFP

Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo receives the ball during a training session in Praia del Rey yesterday on the eve of their 2014 World Cup qualifier against Azerbaijan.

'Pele better than Messi and C'Ron'

INTERNET, Undated

Real Madrid legend Alfredo Di Stefano feels that Pele was a better player than Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.

The Argentine had plenty of kind words for the Madrid star and the Barcelona attacker, but still feels that the former Brazil international was a class apart.

"The best player ever? Pele. Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are both great players with specific qualities, but Pele was better," Di Stefano was quoted as saying by El Colombiano.

Di Stefano then explained what the difference is between Messi and Ronaldo.

"Messi is the more technical player of the two. He's better inside the area, the way he handles the ball and dribbles. You can see that he enjoys himself playing," Di Stefano explained.

"Cristiano has a better body and is physically very strong. He has pace, speed and [is] a player with courage. Plus he can finish with both legs."

The 86-year-old Di Stefano made over 300 appearances for Madrid between 1953 and 1964, winning five European Cups in the process.

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v South Africa

First Women's T20I

Time: 10:00am

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National

Zico plots Japan upset

AFP, Singapore

Former Japan coach Zico will bid to lead Iraq to their first win over the Blue Samurai in 30 years on Tuesday, in a World Cup qualifying fixture with haunting memories for Japanese fans.

The Brazilian legend coached Japan at the 2006 World Cup and led them to victory at the 2004 Asian Cup, giving him valuable insights into Japanese football which will stand him in good stead at Saitama Stadium.

But Zico is well aware of the challenge facing Iraq, who have not reached a World Cup since 1986. Table-toppers Japan are brimming with talent including CSKA Moscow playmaker Keisuke Honda and Manchester United's Shinji Kagawa.

"Japan are one of the superpowers in Asia and have bags of quality," Zico acknowledged, after arriving in Japan on Sunday. "There are a lot of players in the team that can score goals so we have to watch out for all of them."

FIXTURES

Uzbekistan v South Korea at 6:00 pm (1300 GMT)
Lebanon v Iran at 5:00 pm (1400 GMT)
Japan v Iraq at 7:35 pm (1035 GMT)

Asian Games quarterfinals.

After a pulsating 1-1 draw in Australia in June, Japan are in a strong position to reach a fifth consecutive World Cup as one of the top two teams. They currently have a five-point lead at the top of Group B.

Australia meanwhile will hope last week's 3-0 friendly victory against Lebanon is a sign of things to come as they go in search of their first win, away to Jordan.

Australia are looking to reach a third consecutive World Cup but the Socceroos have only two points so far after draws against Oman and Japan.

Jordan are also winless so far, and are looking to bounce back from a 6-0 hammering by Japan in their last outing in the qualifiers. They held Iran 0-0 in a friendly last week.

In Group A, leaders South Korea will try to stay on maximum points when they visit Tashkent to face Uzbekistan.

The Taeguk Warriors are eyeing an eighth consecutive World Cup appearance and they are off to an encouraging start after winning 4-1 in Qatar and 3-0 against Lebanon in June.

Walcott out of Ukraine clash

AFP, London

Arsenal winger Theo Walcott will miss England's World Cup qualifier against Ukraine at Wembley on Tuesday after going down with an illness over the weekend.

Walcott missed training on Monday after complaining of feeling ill 24 hours earlier and has returned to his club.

Chelsea striker Daniel Sturridge was also unable to train on Monday due to stomach cramps, but the England medical team remain hopeful he will be fit for the Group H clash against Ukraine at Wembley.

England manager Roy Hodgson responded to Walcott's withdrawal by calling-up Liverpool's 17-year-old winger Raheem Sterling, Tottenham midfielder Jake Livermore and Southampton midfielder Adam Lallana.

Zidane calls it a 'good match'

AFP, Le Havre

Ex-France playmaker Zinedine Zidane said France had played a "good match" in notching up a 1-0 victory over Finland in their opening qualifying match for the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil.

"It was a good match, simply because Les Bleus won," Zidane said at a press conference marking the 140th anniversary of Le Havre AC -- the oldest club in France, for which a veterans match has been organised against some Real Madrid old boys.

"You have to give a little bit of time to the coach to put everything in place," he said of Didier Deschamps, for whom the Finland game was his first competitive match in charge of France.

Mission: Stop Messi

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Peru's mission to stall Lionel Messi and the Argentine juggernaut at home in their World Cup qualifier on Tuesday may see the team seek inspiration from a famous victory over their South American rivals in Lima 27 years ago.

In 1985, Luis Reyna's tight marking of Diego Maradona was key to an upset 1-0 win over Argentina, and Peru will ponder a similar stopping job against another diminutive and sublimely gifted forward in Messi at the Estadio Nacional in Lima (0125 GMT Wednesday).

Peru look set to give defensive midfielder Edwin Retamoso the daunting task of tracking Messi. "If the Prof (coach Sergio Markarian) gives me the chance, I won't let him down," Retamoso was quoted by Argentine media as saying.

Argentina, with three wins in a row in the qualifiers after Friday's 3-1 home victory over Paraguay when Messi took his tally to 10 goals in six games, lead the South American group with 13 points from six matches.

Peru, looking to reach the finals for the first time since 1982, are seventh with six points.

"We told the players that if we beat Venezuela we'd reduce the pressure and now we make a new start fighting for what we really want," Peru's Uruguayan coach Markarian told reporters.

Peru ended a run of four defeats with a 2-1

home win over Venezuela on Friday, recovering from a goal down to score twice through winger Jefferson Farfan.

Striker Paolo Guerrero, who like Farfan has three goals so far in the qualifiers, is doubtful with a foot injury.

Holding midfielder Javier Mascherano comes back from suspension for Argentina while his understudy Rodrigo Brana serves a ban after a second booking against Paraguay.

Colombia, reinvigorated by a 4-0 rout of Uruguay on Friday, visit second-placed Chile in Santiago (1930 GMT) hoping to climb further up the standings from fifth place three points behind Argentina.

The Colombians will be relying on strikers Radamel Falcao and Teofilo Gutierrez carrying their goalscoring form from the heat of Barranquilla on the Caribbean to the cold of the Chilean capital.

"That's the best I've seen Colombia play in a while," Chile's Claudio Borghi said as he prepared for a duel of Argentine coaches with Colombia's Jose Pekerman.

"They had a totally attacking formation... But I don't think they'll play the same way on Tuesday because the match will be faster," he told reporters.

Ecuador are third in the group after winning their four home matches, including Friday's 1-0 victory over Bolivia settled by a penalty converted by Felipe Caicedo.

They will need to improve their away form if they are to withstand the expected onslaught at the Centenario in Montevideo (2130) from a Uruguay side stung by their heavy defeat in Barranquilla.

Rooney reveals injury horror

AFP, London

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney admits he feared his career could have been over when he suffered a horrific gash in his leg.

Rooney was left with blood pouring out of a deep thigh wound after being caught in the thigh by Hugo Rodallega's boot studs during United's 3-2 win over Fulham at Old Trafford last month.

The England star was rushed to hospital where he discovered the gash was close to severing an artery, which could have had severe repercussions.

In the circumstances, Rooney knows he is fortunate that the injury will only keep him out of action for four weeks and, quoted in several national newspapers, he said: "I was quite lucky it didn't cut my muscle."

"I was told it was just one millimetre away from severing an artery. It could have been a lot worse, so thank God for that. I could have been in serious trouble."



STAR Sports

FIFA WC Qualifiers

Japan v Iraq

Live from 5:30pm

Uzbekistan v Korea Rep

Live from 7:30pm

Jordan v Australia

Live from 11:00pm

Italy v Malta

Live from 1:00am (Wednesday)

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

Live at 11:30pm

FIFA WC Qualifier

Italy v Malta

Live from 1:00am (Wednesday)

STAR Cricket

India v New Zealand



PHOTO: AFP

Brazil fullback Daniel Alves kicks the ball during a training session at the Arruda Stadium in Recife on Sunday ahead of their international friendly against China.