

Del Bosque upbeat on Costa, Navas

AFP, Seville
Spain coach Vicente del Bosque said Thursday he was optimistic that injured duo Diego Costa and Jesus Navas would both be fit in time for the World Cup.

"The prospects appear to be good. On Friday the pair of them will undergo tests. Diego will have a radiology test, as for Jesus he seems to be fine," Del Bosque said at a press conference on the eve of Friday's friendly with Bolivia in Sevilla.

"We will evaluate their conditions and take a decision Saturday morning," added Del Bosque, who is expected to reveal his final 23-man squad for Brazil on Saturday.

Atletico Madrid striker Costa has battled an ongoing hamstring problem that limited him to just nine minutes in last weekend's Champions League final defeat to city rivals Real, a week after he was forced off 15 minutes into his side's title decider with Barcelona.

The head doctor of the clinic where the Spain team sent Costa for a scan warned on Monday that he would require at least two weeks of rest before he could return to action.

Meanwhile, Manchester City winger

Navas has been sidelined with an ankle injury since mid-April.

Owing to question marks over the fitness of key players Del Bosque delayed naming his full World Cup squad last Sunday to allow himself more time to monitor their conditions.

Instead he announced a list of 19 players for the World Cup holders' friendly against Bolivia, leaving out players from the two Spanish teams in last Saturday's Champions League final.

Del Bosque said he would use his full allotment of players in Sevilla, downplaying suggestions that certain individuals would be auditioning for a seat on the plane to Brazil.

"Nobody has anything to prove, the guys who are here have already shown they deserve to be here," said Del Bosque.

Despite a busy end to the season for several of his players, Del Bosque was also upbeat about the health of his charges.

"The season ends and we're asking them to give an extra effort that could last 50 days, and I hope it lasts that long. But honestly we've found them to be in rather good shape."

Spain face Chile, the Netherlands and Australia in World Cup Group B. Their first match pits them on June 13 against the Netherlands -- their opponents in their 2010 World Cup final triumph.



(L-R) Dutch strikers Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, Robin van Persie and playmaker Wesley Sneijder take part in a training session at the Rotterdam Stadium yesterday on the eve of their international friendly against Ghana.

PHOTO: AFP

C'Ron joins training camp

AFP, Lisbon

Real Madrid trio Cristiano Ronaldo, Pepe and Fabio Coentrao joined Portugal's World Cup training camp in Obidos on Thursday, bringing the squad up to its full contingent of 23 players.

The three players had been granted a few extra days to recover before linking up with the national team following Saturday's Champions League final in Lisbon where Real defeated city rivals Atletico 4-1.

Ronaldo, who was still feeling the effects of a thigh injury sustained late in the season, was not expected to take part in a late afternoon training session and remains a doubt for Saturday's friendly against Greece in Lisbon.

The Portugal captain instead carried out rehab work at the team's hotel, the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) said in its daily medical report.

Having played 120 minutes in Saturday's Champions League final, Ronaldo had admitted he "wasn't at 100 percent" having struggled with muscle problems towards the end of the La Liga season.

Cairns vows to clear his name

AFP, Auckland

New Zealand legend Chris Cairns on Friday revealed two former Black Caps captains testified to a probe into his alleged match-fixing and said he was determined to clear his name.

Cairns returned to Auckland after travelling to London for interviews with anti-corruption authorities saying he now had a clearer picture of the "absurd, bizarre and scary" allegations against him.

"Each and every allegation against me that I have cheated at cricket or attempted to induce others to cheat at cricket is false," he told reporters at Auckland airport.

Current New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum and former batsman Lou Vincent have both told ICC investigators that a high-profile cricketer dubbed "Player X" approached them in 2008 to fix matches, according to leaked testimony from the pair.

The new Schillaci?

AFP, Milan

Italian striker Ciro Immobile is on the verge of a dream World Cup debut that has revived memories of Toto Schillaci's incredible campaign at Italia '90.

"I started this season with two objectives: becoming the league's top scorer and earning a call-up to the World Cup squad," Immobile said last week.

The Torino attacker reached the first target with a league-topping 22 goals and is firmly in contention for a place in Cesare Prandelli's final 23-man squad for Brazil.

The 24-year-old has kept his word so well he is now at the centre of speculation of a transfer to one of Europe's top clubs.

"He (Immobile) has scored a lot of goals and silenced the critics who said he was 'only a boy,'" said Prandelli.

"Ten months ago he wasn't in contention but, thanks to his stubbornness, he is now."

A modern-day striker with pace and a keen eye for goal, Immobile's league tally helped him beat Carlos Tevez and Gonzalo Higuain to Serie A's 'capocannoniere' award.

He is now on the radar of Borussia Dortmund in Germany and Barcelona in Spain, according to media reports.

Along with other hopefuls like midfielder Marco Verratti of Paris Saint Germain and Roma forward Mattia Destro, Immobile is among a crop of former under-21 players Prandelli could unleash on the World Cup.

Italy, four time winners of the World Cup start this campaign in Group D against England, Uruguay and Costa Rica.

But he could also be one of the two strikers Prandelli will cut from seven. The group also includes Mario Balotelli, Giuseppe Rossi, Antonio Cassano, Lorenzo Insigne, Destro and Alessandro Cerci.

Italy face Ireland in a friendly in London on Saturday and Prandelli has said he would decide afterwards which players to cut.

But Italian pundits are already purring at the prospect of an Immobile/Balotelli partnership and a possible repeat of Schillaci's exploits for the Azzurri.

Schillaci, who retired with only 16 caps and seven goals for Italy, told La Gazzetta dello Sport that Immobile-Balotelli would be "a great partnership."

"Like Schillaci and (Gianluca) Vialli - Mario is more physical and stronger like Vialli, and Ciro has my speed."

"Neither of them is a true centre-forward, like (Luca) Toni or (Alberto) Gilardino. Both of them like to wander out of the area, play the ball and run into the area. But both are modern-day strikers, and together they could really be something special."

Schillaci went from zero to hero in 1990, at the World Cup hosted by Italy, coming off the bench to score six goals which helped cement a place in Azeglio Vicini's starting line-up and won the 'Golden Boot' award.

Prandelli has already imagined a similar World Cup debut for Immobile: "In the history of the World Cup, other strikers have emerged like this -- Paolo Rossi, or Schillaci."

As opposed to Immobile, who scored 10 goals in 14 games for Italy at under-21 level, the then 25-year-old Schillaci had never played for Italy when he was picked from relative obscurity after winning the Italian Cup and UEFA Cup with Juventus.

That made his stunning display at Italia '90 all the more remarkable. Schillaci scored in every game bar one up to Italy's semi-final defeat to Argentina and again, against England in the third place match.

Immobile says the comparison with Schillaci is premature: "I was only born in 1990! But the comparison doesn't faze me, it's nice to be compared to a player who has helped write the story of Italian football."

But with the chance to play his own key role for Italy in Brazil, Immobile is not about to let his chance slip.

"I'm super motivated, I'm here to win a place and show that what I've done in the championship isn't a flash in the pan," he added.

"Now, it's up to the coach to make his

Wenger signs new deal

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has signed a new three-year contract extension that will keep him at the Emirates Stadium until 2017, the Premier League club said on Friday.

"Arsenal Holdings plc confirms that Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has signed a new three-year extension to his current contract with Arsenal Football Club plc, a wholly owned subsidiary, taking his tenure at the Club to May 2017," the club said in a statement.

The 64-year-old Frenchman has led Arsenal to three Premier League titles and five FA Cups since joining from Japanese club Nagoya Grampus Eight 18 years ago but this month's 3-2 FA Cup final win over Hull City was their first silverware since 2005.

Wenger had delayed putting pen to paper on a new contract, despite stating publicly that he was planning to stay at the London club.

Arsenal led the Premier League for much of last season before fading to fourth, good enough to secure Champions League football for a 17th successive year.

The goal is to recreate the climate of northeast Brazil and the Amazon, where Italy play their three first-round matches.

POSTCARDS FROM HOME

Belgium's postal service will hand out free postcards so fans can send messages of

WORLD CUP BRIEFS

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

MAGIC NUMBER

Uruguayans hoping their team can pull off a repeat of their 1950 World Cup upset against Brazil have found a new source of optimism in a mathematical formula that has gone viral on social networks.

The magic number, according to the theory, is 3964. Brazil won the World Cup in 1970 and 1994. Add those up and you get 3964. Argentina won in 1978 and 1986, Brazil again in 1962 and 2002, Germany in 1974 and 1990 -- all add up to 3964.

By that logic, Uruguay should be due for its next championship in -- grab your calculator -- 2014.

FOOTBALL WITH THE BOSS

Most companies in Argentina will let their employees watch World Cup matches live, according to a survey of 168 firms.

Human resources specialists Mercer found that 88% of Argentine companies had decided to show matches on TV at work -- though 80% will only let their staff watch Argentina's own games.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Italy's coaches have tried to create a training environment in Florence to mimic the conditions the Azzurri will face in Brazil.

They have set up a small wooden shed beside their locker room where players run on treadmills or ride stationary bikes in temperatures of up to 33 degrees Celsius (91 Fahrenheit) and humidity of around 70 percent.

The goal is to recreate the climate of northeast Brazil and the Amazon, where Italy play their three first-round matches.

POSTCARDS FROM HOME

Belgium's postal service will hand out free postcards so fans can send messages of

support to the national team in Brazil.

Officials said the cards would be read out every day to the "Red Devils," who have enthralled their fans by qualifying for their first World Cup in 12 years.

POLITICAL BACKING

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said defending champs Spain were "the team to beat" at the World Cup, but admitted they faced a tough group.

"Holland bring back good memories (of Spain's 2010 World Cup final win), but it's a bad opponent to start the tournament," he said. "And Chile is one of the best teams in South America."

He voiced confidence in coach Vicente del Bosque, "who knows football like few others."

DON'T BUY AN IGUANA IN BRAZIL

World Cup fans looking for that special souvenir from Brazil should know it is illegal to buy parrots, iguanas, monkeys, birds, snakes, butterflies, spiders and other wildlife, authorities said, releasing a list of environmental guidelines for tourists.

Buying wildlife, dead or alive, is punishable by a fine of up to 5,000 reals (\$2,300, 1,700 euros) per animal and a prison sentence of up to one year, said the Rio Grande do Norte state branch of the Brazilian Environment and Resources Institute.

NO SELFIES WITH CR7

Bosses at The Palms hotel in Campinas, outside Sao Paulo, have told employees they will have to surrender their cell phones each day before work to guard against surreptitious photos of Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo.

"Welcoming a team is an honour but also a responsibility," said manager Antonio Dias. "In a hotel of our stature, we have to be

Honduras blanked

AFP, Washington

Mevlut Erdinc scored one goal and set up another as Turkey defeated Brazil-bound Honduras 2-0 on Thursday in a World Cup warmup friendly match.

Erdinc, a striker for French club Saint-Etienne, scored in the 70th minute and made the key pass to Caner Erkin for his 83rd minute tally.

It was the first in a series of World Cup preparation matches for Honduras, which will open play in Brazil against France on June 15 and also face Ecuador and Switzerland in Group E matches.

"Los Catrachos" also face warmup matches against Israel on Sunday at Houston and at Miami on June 7 against England.

Turkey, which failed to qualify for the World Cup, sported a young lineup that lacked injured Arda Turan of Champions League runner-up Atletico Madrid. They will face the World Cup-bound United States on Sunday in suburban New York.

Turkey's Ishak Dogan set up the first goal when he faked past Honduran defender Brayon Beckles and charged in from the right of goalkeeper Noel Valladares, the 37-year-old Honduran captain.

Moments later, Erdinc directed a centering pass into the back of the net.

Turkey added an insurance goal when

tightly guarded Erdinc flicking the ball to unmarked Erkin, who charged into the penalty area and blasted home a left-footed shot.

Honduras, bolstered by thousands of loud supporters in the crowd of 20,723 at RFK Stadium, set the early pace but the best chance went lacking when Roger Espinoza of English club Wigan had a blast from the left wing booted away by Turkish teen defender Ozan Tufan.

Honduras received a scare in the 22nd minute when midfielder Wilson Palacios, who plays for English Premier League side Stoke City, remained crumpled on the pitch after tangling legs with a Turkish defender.

Trainers treated his right leg and Palacios rose and went on to remain in the match, his 93rd appearance for the Blue and White.

Attacking successfully along the wings, the Central Americans struggled to connect on centering efforts.

Espinoza missed an open shot in the 39th minute, his left-footed challenge from the right of Turkish goalkeeper Tolga Zengin rolling wide of the far post.

Jerry Bengtson was offered another solid chance in the 43rd minute but his right-footed strike in stride down the right side missed the near post.

Just over nine minutes into the second half, another opportunity went wanting for Honduras when defender Emilio Figueroa nodded a header off a corner kick into Zengin's arms.

Costa Rica lose Saborio

REUTERS

Costa Rica's World Cup hopes suffered a major blow on Thursday when striker Alvaro Saborio was ruled out of next month's finals with a broken bone in his foot.

Saborio suffered the injury in a closed-door training session on Thursday morning and coach Jorge Luis Pinto later told a news conference his first-choice forward would miss the entire tournament.

Costa Rica face England, Italy and Uruguay in Group D in Brazil.

"After hearing the doctor's opinion and talking with the player we have to face up to the reality - Alvaro will not be at the World Cup," said Pinto.