

Sirigu, Balotelli fears allayed

INTERNET

Italy's team doctor said Salvatore Sirigu has not suffered broken ribs and that Mario Balotelli does not have a groin injury. After making a save during Monday evening's training session at Coverciano, goalkeeper Sirigu complained of sharp pain in ribs. Fears were that he had fractured them, but the Azzurri's team doctor has eased such suggestions. "Fortunately tests have ruled out fractures," Enrico Castellacci told reporters on Tuesday. "The guy has badly bruised the right 11th rib, with post-impact swelling. It is a tedious injury, painful but manageable, we are relieved, we are much more relaxed. In short, there is no reason to alert any replacements." Castellacci was also asked about Mario Balotelli's condition. The Milan man trained with the group on Monday despite reports that he was struggling with a groin injury. "Is that an exaggeration? Yes it is. He does not have a groin injury, he can play. He is training hard, he only had an overload in training, but we are managing it. He is available to the Coach and is in condition to play [tomorrow's game with Luxembourg]."

DEMICHELIS makes the cut

REUTERS, Buenos Aires



Central defender Martin Demichelis was named on Monday in Argentina's 23-man World Cup squad while regular reserve midfielder Ever Banega was left out.

Coach Alejandro Sabella recalled Demichelis to his provisional squad last month after his title-winning season with English Premier League side Manchester City following more than two years out of the Argentina reckoning.

The defender who made way for Demichelis is another veteran of the 2010 finals in South Africa, Nicolas Otamendi, who was on loan at Brazil's Atletico Mineiro and had also only recently been recalled by Sabella.

Benfica winger Enzo Perez also found a place in the squad for the Brazil finals starting on June 12 but Banega, who joined Newell's Old Boys from Valencia this season, missed the cut after illness and loss of form.

Argentina, captained by Lionel Messi, will be looking to win their third world crown. They face Bosnia, Iran and Nigeria in Group F.

ARGENTINA FINAL SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Sergio Romero (Sampdoria), Mariano Andujar (Catania), Agustin Orion (Boca Juniors)
Defenders: Pablo Zabaleta (Manchester City), Federico Fernandez (Napoli), Ezequiel Garay (Benfica), Marcos Rojo (Sporting Lisbon), Hugo Campagnaro (Inter Milan), Martin Demichelis (Manchester City), Jose Basanta (Monterrey)
Midfielders: Javier Mascherano (Barcelona), Fernando Gago (Boca Juniors), Lucas Biglia (Lazio), Ricardo Alvarez (Inter Milan), Augusto Fernandez (Celta Vigo), Angel Di Maria (Real Madrid), Maxi Rodriguez (Newell's Old Boys), Enzo Perez (Benfica)
Forwards: Lionel Messi (Barcelona), Gonzalo Higuain (Napoli), Sergio Aguero (Manchester City), Rodrigo Palacio (Inter Milan), Ezequiel Lavezzi



A dejected Radamel Falcao (R) sits next to Colombia coach Jose Pekerman as he announces his 23-man final squad for the World Cup at a press conference in Buenos Aires on Monday.

Falcao's nightmare comes true

AFP, Campana



Colombia's talismanic striker Radamel Falcao will miss the World Cup after losing his battle to recover from the crushing knee injury he sustained playing for his club Monaco in January.

The 28-year-old's absence from Brazil was confirmed on Tuesday by Colombia coach Jose Pekerman.

"It's a sad night," the Argentine told a press conference at his squad's training camp in Campana.

"With a great deal of sadness I must inform you that Radamel Falcao and Luis Perea will not be taking part in the World Cup because they have not recovered

from their injuries."

Falcao, who has scored 20 goals in 51 international appearances, suffered serious knee ligament damage in a French Cup tie on January 22 and has not played since.

He's been training with the Colombia squad since the end of last month but his fitness level has failed to satisfy the Colombian team's medical experts.

"It's a difficult time. I'll be supporting the team with all my force," said the striker.

"The forwards picked for the World Cup are great players who have the backing of the entire team and the coaches.

"They've been good throughout the season," he added.

Pekerman hinted at a divergence of views between him and the Colombian football federation's

medical team.

"I wanted him to play no matter what part," said Pekerman.

"Sometimes man can move mountains, and other times he's powerless.

"This decision concerning Falcao is the conclusion of the experts."

The news hit Colombia's football fans hard, with the former River Plate, FC Porto and Atletico Madrid attacker as well known in Bogota as celebrated singer Shakira.

His fate has kept the nation of 46 million holding its collective breath.

Colombia are drawn in Group C in Brazil with Ivory Coast, Greece and Japan.

Their hopes of making it into the second round will in part rest now on the shoulders of Falcao's Monaco teammate, midfielder

COLOMBIA FINAL SQUAD

Goalkeepers: David Ospina, Faryd Mondragón, Camilo Vargas
Defenders: Mario Yepes, Cristian Zapata, Carlos Valdes, Eder Álvarez, Santiago Arias, Camilo Zúñiga, Pablo Armero
Midfielders: Carlos Sánchez, Fredy Guarín, Abel Aguilar, Aldo Leao Ramirez, Juan Fernando Quintero, Victor Ibarbo, Alexander Mejía, James Rodríguez, Juan Guillermo Cuadrado
Forwards: Teófilo Gutiérrez, Carlos Bacca, James Rodriguez.

Despite Falcao's absence Pekerman said: "We have to believe in this team, it's got high ambitions and it's ready to take on the big sides."

Amla named new SA Test captain

AFP, Johannesburg

South African star batsman Hashim Amla was named the country's Test cricket captain on Tuesday, replacing retiring Graeme Smith who led the side for a decade. A "glad and humbled" Amla said he would give "all his heart" to the role, vowing to put together a "winning combination" able to return South Africa to the top of the Test rankings. "Throughout the years I have concentrated mainly on my batting, trying to become the best batsman possible and hopefully I can still get there," Amla said. "But now I do feel it is time to act, to contribute in a team environment." Amla, 31, who made his Test debut against India in Kolkata 10 years ago, praised the work done by his predecessor, whose legacy looms large.



Argentina midfielder Angel Di Maria controls the ball during a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires on May 31, 2014.

PHOTO: AFP

He doesn't run alone

ESPN, Buenos Aires



When you see him run, most people wonder where he gets so much energy. The same thing happened to his family when the little 3-year-old would break everything in his path. A doctor suggested that they start him off in soccer. Thus, he began to hit the little ball.

Argentina's Angel Di Maria had to make sacrifices to become a top player. And he was never alone. The beginnings in his native Rosario were not easy. There was no food leftover in the family's humble home in the barrio of La Ceramica, but there was contention. His parents bought him his first football cleats with great effort.

His mother, Diana, took him to the neighbourhood club by bicycle. When passing by the Rosario Central stadium she would say, "Someday you're going to play here." His father, Miguel, with characteristics on the field similar to those of his son, nearly made it into River's first team, but he suffered a serious knee injury during a game with friends that

sidelined him from the game. He then worked for 16 years in a coal yard, under adverse conditions. From age 10, Angel began to help. By 15 he was already taking care of deliveries, opening and closing the bags of coal.

At 17, "Fideo" ("Noodle") managed to fulfill the dream of reaching the top flight that his father once had. At the call of Benfica, Miguel reminded his son that "the train only passes once." Upon being sold to Portugal, Angel asked his father not to work anymore and bought a house for his parents and sisters, Vanesa and Evelyn. His six friends from Perdiel are also very important. At 18, they all got the same tattoo -- Di Maria's is on his left forearm -- to feel closer together regardless of their distance apart.

The romance with the national team was immediate. He was crowned a U-20 world champion in 2007 in Canada, and it was his goal that brought gold to Argentina in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. He immediately arrived at the senior squad, then led by Alfio Basile, and celebrated his first goal in late 2009, with Diego Maradona then in charge.

"He's going to be one of the world's best; I love to watch him play,"

Maradona said.

The leap he made was superlative. Rosario Central signed him at the age of 7 after witnessing him score a brace in a local final, costing the club 25 balls. Fifteen years later, Real Madrid had acquired him for 25 million euros -- plus an extra 11 million in potential add-ons. His time in Portugal had come to a close, leaving behind a pair of league cups and a league title.

Then-Madrid boss Jose Mourinho changed the 155-pound left-winger's career. Mourinho placed him in a new position, on the right; Mourinho taught him the importance of sacrifice; and Mourinho disciplined him tactically. Under the Portuguese, Di Maria earned a place in the starting XI and won titles. But as Carlo Ancelotti replaced the departed Mourinho, Di Maria's future was no longer secure.

To make matters worse, the Argentine made a controversial gesture during a match against Celta in early 2014 after being substituted for record signing Gareth Bale. It did not go unnoticed. Although he attempted to explain himself, a rift had formed.

"Here they're always waiting for me to do something in order to kill me," he said with anger.

Despite the distractions, Di Maria continued endeavouring, playing and running -- just like in the national team's game against Bolivia in La Paz, in which he required the assistance of an oxygen tank after the match. He soon resolved his situation with Real Madrid, and was a key figure in obtaining their 10th Champions League title.

Di Maria's life is characterised by struggle, like his daughter Mia, born in April 2013, three months prematurely. During the two-plus difficult months the baby spent hospitalised, the support of his wife, Jorgelina, was very important. In return, he dedicated his goals to her by making the shape of a heart with his hands. Before each game, his mother blesses him, and his wife lights candles to St. Expedite.

Di Maria is a vital player for Alejandro Sabella's side, so much so that he once captained the team in qualifying. He forms a formidable attack with Lionel Messi, Sergio Aguero and Gonzalo Higuain, and Argentina rely on him to track back and defend when possession is lost.

"I run for my family, friends and neighbours," he said once in an interview. Looking back at his story, it's

Baby panda predictors!

AFP, Beijing



A crack team of baby pandas will be used to predict World Cup scores, according to reports, in a Chinese answer to deceased soccer soothsayer Paul the Octopus.

The cuddly creatures will predict match winners by picking food from a choice of baskets and by climbing trees at China's foremost panda breeding base in the southwestern province of Sichuan, the official Xinhua news agency said on Monday.

China hopes the bears will be odds-on to match the worldwide fame achieved by Paul, the German octopus which correctly predicted the results of several games at the 2010 World Cup using its tentacles.

During the group stages in Brazil this month, pandas aged between one and two years old will select food from three bamboo baskets representing either a win, loss or draw, Xinhua said.

For the knock-out rounds, the animals will select winners by climbing trees marked with the national flags of competing nations, it added.

They will have to go a long way to beat Paul the tentacled oracle, however, which successfully predicted the outcome of eight matches by choosing a mussel or oyster from one of two boxes bearing the flags of participating nations.

The octopus died in October 2010, not long after that year's World Cup in South Africa. Its success spawned "psychic" imitators for Euro 2012 including a pig, an Indian elephant and a raccoon.



WE DON'T PREFER TAKING CHANCES, EVEN WHEN IT COMES TO THE FINAL WORLD CUP SQUADS. DONE WITH THAT

The Daily Star WILL KICK OFF THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO BRAZIL 2014 ON JUNE 8

ASK YOUR HAWKER FOR YOUR COPY