

Luxembourg hold Italy

AFP, Perugia



Italy were stunned by a late goal from minnows Luxembourg as they were forced to settle for a 1-1 draw in Perugia in their final friendly match before heading to the World Cup in Brazil.

Illness and injury forced Italy coach Cesare Prandelli into an experimental 4-1-4-1 formation, with Andrea Pirlo and Marco Verratti playing together in midfield in front of Daniele De Rossi, leaving Claudio Marchisio and Antonio Candreva to support lone frontman Mario Balotelli.

Prandelli's tactic soon reaped rewards as Marchisio, who initially played in Balotelli on the right, headed home the AC Milan man's cross after just nine minutes.

However, a series of defensive lapses and wasted opportunities allowed Maxime Chanot to seal an impressive

result for the team who sit 120th in the FIFA rankings in the 85th minute of the game.

As was to be expected, Italy started the match on the front foot and dominated possession before Juventus midfielder Marchisio's header beat visiting goalkeeper Anthony Moris.

Moments later, Candreva played Balotelli in on goal, but a last-ditch challenge from Mario Mutsch prevented the hosts from doubling their lead.

Balotelli and Verratti both saw shots go off target, while Candreva also fired high and wide from the edge of the penalty area.

Then, as the first half came to a close, Pirlo forced Moris into an excellent save from a free-kick just outside the penalty area.

Ten minutes into the second period, Antonio Cassano, earning his 36th cap for Italy, replaced the impressive Verratti and made an immediate impact on the game.

The Parma striker's through ball split the Luxembourg defence and found Balotelli, who evaded the challenge of two defenders but saw his shot come back off the bar.

Then, seconds later, a Balotelli cross was met by the head of Candreva, who himself could only rattle the woodwork.

Late substitutes Lorenzo Insigne and Alessio Cerci added some width for the Azzurri in the final 15 minutes, with Cerci in particular looking lively, testing Moris with a low shot from the right edge of the penalty box.

But just as the game looked to be heading to an expected end, Chanot lost his marker Alberto Aquilani to head home a Mutsch corner, leaving the home crowd stunned.

Prandelli's men could not find a winner, and the four-time world champions now head to Brazil with a lot of soul-searching to do ahead of their first Group D match against England in Manaus on June 15.



Netherlands striker Robin van Persie

Brazil move up to third

AFP, Paris

Brazil move up to third in the last FIFA rankings, released before the World Cup starts in one week.

Reigning world champions Spain remain top of the rankings, released Thursday, followed by Germany with Brazil moving ahead of Portugal, who drop to fourth.

Argentina move up two spots to fifth with England up one place to join the top 10. Greece fell to 12th and France dropped one place to 17th.

Croatia who play Brazil in the opening World Cup match on June 12 move up two places to 18th.

- TOP TEN**
1. Spain
 2. Germany
 3. Brazil (+1)
 4. Portugal (-1)
 5. Argentina (+2)
 6. Switzerland (+2)
 7. Uruguay (-1)
 8. Colombia (-3)
 9. Italy
 10. England (+1)

Klinsmann takes casual approach

INTERNET, Undated

US coach Jurgen Klinsmann has made it clear that unlike their Mexican counterparts, his players are free to have all the sex they want during the World Cup. Klinsmann was asked about his stance on the matter by Fusion TV after Mexico manager Miguel Herrera took a firm position in favour of abstinence for the duration of the World Cup.

"I think we are very casual in the way we approach things. Their families can come pretty much any time. They will be at the games, they can come by at the hotel, we will have barbecues together," Klinsmann told Fusion's The Soccer Gods. "Every nation is different. I've played in different countries where, you know, you didn't see your girlfriend or your wife for two months. That was more the Italian background when I played in Italy. So I respect the Mexican approach because it's more their culture at that moment. I think we have a group of guys together and an environment together that is very open, it's very casual. But once we go on the field for training and also for the games, we are very serious and down to business."

Uruguay warmup well

REUTERS, Montevideo



Striker Edinson Cavani and substitute Christian Stuani scored to fire Uruguay to a 2-0 win over Slovenia in their final World Cup warmup at the Centenario on Wednesday.

Cavani nipped between the centre backs to head home a fine cross into the box from the left by Diego Forlan and Stuani scored his second goal in two games in the 75th minute following his effort in Friday's 1-0 win over Northern Ireland.

Centre back Diego Godin returned to the side after missing the Northern Ireland match, completing a lineup that may well be repeated for Uruguay's World Cup opener against Costa Rica in Fortaleza on June 14.

Top striker Luis Suarez was again missing as he recovers from knee surgery and may

Winning is everything: Neymar

AFP, Teresopolis

Brazil may be renowned for its 'jogo bonito', or beautiful game, but Neymar says winning is what counts as the World Cup hosts look to land their sixth title.

"Beautiful football is the last thing we are concerned about -- what we want to do is to win," insisted the starlet even though he produced plenty of style in scoring one and making two in Tuesday's 4-0 friendly romp over Panama.

"Our team's mentality is always the same -- always beat any adversary, whoever they are," the Barcelona star told the website of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF).

"We always want to score goals and, if we can, play well" in the process.

Under coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, architect of their 2002 success, Brazil are relying on Neymar to provide the flair with a solid defence at his back as they prepare to deliver the home title the Selecao lost out on when they last hosted the event in 1950. Brazil face Serbia in their final pre-tournament warm-up on Friday in Sao Paulo before they take on opening Group A rivals Croatia in the June 12 curtain-raiser.

Cameroon and Mexico make up the remainder of the group.

Van Persie suffers groin problem

AFP, Amsterdam

Robbin van Persie has handed the Netherlands a fitness worry ahead of the World Cup after the Manchester United striker picked up a groin problem in Wednesday's 2-0 friendly win over Wales in Amsterdam.

Van Persie appeared to be in pain and held his groin when he left the pitch at half-time and Dutch coach Louis van Gaal took no risks over the fitness of his star striker as the 30-year-old was immediately replaced by Jermain Lens.

Now Van Gaal, whose 23-man squad fly out to Rio de Janeiro on Thursday, will be praying that his captain is not ruled out for a significant period of time and can recover from the injury scare to participate in the Netherlands' World Cup opener against reigning champions Spain in Salvador on June 13.

Before his half-time departure, Van Persie set up Arjen Robben for the opening goal of the friendly in the 32nd minute at the Amsterdam Arena.

Robben then turned provider to allow substitute Lens to double the Dutch side's advantage by tapping home from close-range on 76 minutes.

Prior to kick-off, there was great colour and noise inside the national stadium to create a party atmosphere as the Dutch public waved farewell to their stars before the World Cup.

Manchester United manager in waiting Van Gaal had played a formation of 5-3-2 versus Ghana at the weekend, but the 62-year-old demonstrated his flexibility by changing his style to a 4-4-2 diamond against Chris Coleman's side.

Wales were without Gareth Bale, Aaron Ramsey and Ashley Williams while five of

Coleman's starting line-up had not played for a month since the Championship season ended and the hosts almost took advantage immediately.

Van Persie tested Wayne Hennessey's reflexes in the third minute with a low shot before Neil Taylor cleared the danger.

Robben then dragged a shot wide after Welsh debutant James Chester of Hull City was caught out by Stefan de Vrij's long pass.

Yet Chester and Wales gradually grew into the first period and almost took a surprise lead in the 20th minute.

Simon Church was released down the left flank and the Charlton striker's dangerous centre required a last-ditch clearance by Bruno Martins Indi.

The Dutch did not appear at their best, but that scare woke them up. Robben should have scored when the Bayern Munich wideman latched onto Wesley Sneijder's through ball and beat Hennessey only for Chester to clear off the line.

But that was a warning for Wales as Van Gaal's World Cup-bound side went ahead on 32 minutes albeit in fortunate circumstances.

Van Persie forced Hennessey into a low save with a fierce left-footed shot and the rebound bounced off Chester and into the path of Robben, who made no mistake as she slotted past Hennessey.

That settled the Dutch and skipper Van Persie came close to making it two just before the interval when he side-footed Daryl Janmaat's cross wide of the far post.

Then came the concerning sight for Oranje supporters as Van Persie clutched his groin when he left the pitch at the break.

But the Netherlands extended their lead courtesy of Lens, who side-footed home from close-range following a powerful and pacy burst by Robben to breeze past Danny Gabbidon as the Netherlands depart for Brazil in a positive frame of mind despite the concern over Van Persie.

Eng friendly turns sour

AFP, Miami

Wayne Rooney and Rickie Lambert were on target for an experimental England side in a 2-2 friendly draw with Ecuador on Wednesday which turned sour with two late red cards.

Ecuador grabbed an eighth minute lead through a thundering header from Enner Valencia before England drew level in the 29th minute with Rooney poking home after a scramble in the area.

The double red cards came after a wild challenge from England substitute Raheem Sterling on Antonio Valencia.

Pique gaffe reveals Cesc price tag

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique has apparently let slip that teammate Cesc Fabregas is leaving the club for 33 million euros (\$45 million) in a remark overheard by Spanish public television.

Without revealing the attacking midfielder's destination, widely rumoured to be Chelsea, the 27-year-old Pique seemed to inadvertently divulge his friend's price tag to the world at an event in the United States.

Pique put his hand over his mouth but spoke into the live microphone of public television TVE at a promotional event in Washington DC where Spain were training ahead of a friendly against El Salvador on Saturday.

"He's told me it's done," Pique can be heard telling Spain coach Vicente del Bosque moments before the start of a news conference at the event on Wednesday.

"He is going. He told me 33 million," Pique said.

Ghanaian witch doctor caused C'Ron injury

GUARDIAN, London



Ghana's most influential witch doctor has claimed he is responsible for the knee injury that is threatening Cristiano Ronaldo's participation at the World Cup.

Nana Kwaku Bonsam - whose name translates literally as "Devil of Wednesday" - predicted in February that the Real Madrid forward would be forced to miss this summer's tournament in Brazil with injury. A statement from the Portuguese FA on Wednesday confirmed that Ronaldo is suffering from tendinitis in his left knee as well as nursing a muscle problem in his left thigh, which caused him to miss the 0-0 draw with Greece at the weekend.

Ghana are set to meet Portugal in their final match of Group G in Brasilia on 26 June and Bonsam claims to have conjured a special powder from his gods, mixed with several leaves and concoctions which have been placed around an image and caricature of the former Manchester United player.

"I know what Cristiano Ronaldo's injury is about, I'm working on him," Bonsam, who serves at the Kofioo Kofi shrine, said in an interview with the Kumasi-based Angel FM.

"I am very serious about it. Last week, I went around looking for four dogs and I got them to be used in manufacturing a special spirit called Kahwiri Kapam."

"I said it four months ago that I will work on Cristiano Ronaldo seriously and rule him out of the World up or at least prevent him from playing against Ghana."



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