

Still up for the Italian job

AFP, Milan



They may have a combined age of 71 but Gianluigi Buffon and Andrea Pirlo are as hungry as Italy's young guns as they embark on a possible World Cup swansong this summer.

Buffon, a World Cup winner in 2006, is now 36 years old but the Juventus goalkeeper is quick to parry any suggestions his winning desire is on the wane. "I'm still hungry," said Buffon when asked his feelings ahead of Italy's quest for a record-equalling fifth World Cup title.

If Italy are to negotiate a potentially tricky Group D campaign, before possibly meeting Spain or Brazil later on, a pair of safe hands and a midfield orchestrator with few peers in the game will be essential.

Together, Buffon and Pirlo boast 247 Italy appearances, Buffon holding the current national record of 139 as he and Pirlo head into their fourth and third World Cup campaigns respectively.

That experience, and the pair's understanding from playing together at Juventus, can only benefit a squad in which Cesare Prandelli has included several fresher faces.

Buffon has been untouchable as Italy's number one since pushing Francesco Toldo aside four games into the qualifying campaign for the 2002 World Cup.

He was in stunning form at Germany 2006, conceding a World Cup record of two goals throughout and finishing with five clean sheets as Italy set up a final against France.

With the scores tied 1-1, Buffon crucially saved a header from Zinedine Zidane in extra time before the match went on to penalties, where Italy triumphed 5-3.

In South Africa four years later, Buffon was replaced at half-time due to a sciatic nerve problem before Italy went on to draw their opening group game 1-1 against

Paraguay. It was his last game of the tournament and, tellingly, Italy failed to get past the first round.

Buffon captained Italy for Euro 2012, and the effect was instant. He conceded only three goals on Italy's path to the final where the Azzurri were humbled 4-0 by Spain.

Having conceded just 23 league goals in yet another triumphant Serie A season, Buffon has no doubts about what he expects from Italy in Brazil. "I expect our squad to be solid, organised and determined not to lose games by our own design," said Buffon.

"It will be hard to beat everyone, but other teams will have to work hard if they want to beat us, we won't be giving anything away for free."

As Buffon barks from the back, Pirlo will go about his quieter but no less important role of conducting play from in front of the defence, moving the ball forward and seizing on deadball situations where he can

exploit his stunning free-kick abilities. Former Italy coach Marcello Lippi once said: "Pirlo is a silent leader. He speaks with his feet."

Pirlo's vision, technical skill, passing and goalscoring have been crucial to Italy at key stages in recent years.

A pair of Pirlo free kicks against Scotland secured Italy's ticket for the 2006 World Cup and in Germany the then AC Milan midfielder was on fire.

In the semi-final Pirlo assisted Italy's opening goal in a 2-0 win against Germany, and in the final he delivered the corner from which Marco Materazzi headed the equaliser to Zidane's early opener for France.

As the match went to penalties, Pirlo scored Italy's first spot-kick to send the Azzurri on to a 5-3 win, ending the campaign with three man-of-the-match awards and inclusion into the team of the tournament.

Ahead of what could be his, and Buffon's final World Cup, the keeper says few words are needed to describe his fellow veteran: "He's a genius, what else is there to say?"



GIANLUIGI BUFFON



ANDREA PIRLO

Maradona slams FIFA

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Argentina legend Diego Maradona lashed out at "bribes" within FIFA, demanding action against those involved in corruption claims linked to Qatar's World Cup bid, in remarks published Sunday.

"There are huge bribes" in the world football governing body, UAE-based Maradona told Abu Dhabi daily, Al-Ittihad. "Those behind them must be held accountable, especially in regards to the latest events related to awarding Qatar the 2022 World Cup.

"Where has this money gone, who received it, and why," must all be investigated, he said, adding that he had repeatedly denounced, "in vain, cases of bribery within FIFA."

Qatar is facing growing pressure over its hosting of the 2022 World Cup after fresh allegations over the role disgraced former top football official Mohammed bin Hammam played in its bid.

Last week, Britain's Sunday Times newspaper said it had obtained millions of emails, documents and bank transfers showing that bin Hammam paid over \$5 million (3.67m euros) from slush funds to win support in the bidding process.

FIFA completes its probe Monday into the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bids, won by Russia and Qatar, chaired by former US attorney Michael Garcia.

"I hope football would go back to being a fun game away from bribery and corruption," said Maradona, who will be present at the World Cup in Brazil as a commentator for a Venezuelan television channel.

Blood not always thicker than water

AFP, Paris



Kevin-Prince Boateng and Jerome Boateng will be one of several pairs of brothers to line up at the World Cup finals, but unlike the others they will be on opposing sides.

Even more unusually, just as in 2010, they will face each other in the group stage.

While Yaya and Kolo Toure from the Ivory Coast and Hondurans Wilson and Jerry Palacios can give each other fraternal advice and morale boosting chats, there will be none of that between the Boateng half-brothers.

For Ghanaian forward Kevin-Prince and German defender Jerome, who made history in 2010 becoming the first brothers to face each other in a World Cup finals, there is a strict no contact policy before they play each other even in the Bundesliga, where the former turns out for Schalke 04 and the latter for champions Bayern Munich.

This will hold true for the brothers, whose father is Ghanaian but both have German mothers, till Germany play Ghana in Fortaleza on June 21 in their Group G game.

However, at least they arrive at this World Cup on speaking terms.

This was not the case back in 2010 when Kevin-Prince, who is the elder at 27 while Jerome is 25, had been vilified in Germany for a tackle on Michael Ballack in the English FA Cup final between his side Portsmouth and Chelsea which ruled the German star out of the finals.

That tackle only served to add fuel to the fire in Germany of Kevin-Prince's image, where he was viewed as a wild child who had been in trouble with the police as a youngster, and has several tattoos associated with gangster life on his body.

Jerome, though, is fed up with this image of his brother and spoke out last



The Boateng brothers shake hands prior to a match between Germany and Ghana during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. PHOTO: STAR FILE

year defending him over that tackle and also of his pride when Kevin-Prince was hailed for leading his then AC Milan team-mates off the pitch in a pre-season friendly when he heard racist abuse from the other team's fans.

"It (the tackle) just happened, and it fitted the mould of a lot of people at that time. The Ghetto kid from the deprived area, the gangster footballer from Wedding (an area of Berlin) and whatever else was published about him," he told German newspaper Der Tagesspiegel last year.

"But now this, I am proud of him. It could have ended differently."

While the Boatengs have had their differences, the bond between the Palacios boys, Wilson who is an attacking midfielder with Premier League side Stoke City and Jerry a striker for Costa Rican outfit Alajuelense, has been made even tighter because of their grief over the murder by a kidnap gang of their younger brother Edwin in 2009.

"If either of us scores a goal it would be a very special moment to stay with us for life," Wilson told the Stoke

Argentina easily beat Slovenia 2-0 in their last World Cup warmup with goals from Ricardo Alvarez and Lionel Messi on Saturday.

Alvarez put a second-sitting Argentina ahead in the first half with a shot from the edge of the penalty area.

Messi, Sergio Aguero and Angel Di Maria came on in the second half and combined elegantly to double the lead in the 67th minute.

Diego Costa looked plenty fit for the World Cup, using a burst of speed on his injured hamstring to draw an early penalty and playing into the 74th minute to help Spain beat El Salvador 2-0 outside Washington D.C.

"It was good to get rid of the fear I had," Costa said through an interpreter. "I am not 100 percent, but about the injury, it is clear that I am very well, that I am better. So this week I must work hard."

David Villa scored his 57th and

58th international goals amidst numerous near-misses for the reigning world champs

England and Honduras drew 0-0 in a fiery and physical match that saw Honduras defender Brayan Beckeles sent off in Miami.

The weather was as wild as some of the action on the pitch, with the game halted midway through the first half for 45 minutes for a lightning storm.

England struggled to create scoring chances even with a man advantage, and the pressure will grow for Ross Barkley to start in Brazil after the 20-year-old midfielder raised the tempo when he came on at half time.

Beckeles, who had been booked for a lunge on Danny Welbeck, was shown a second yellow card in the 66th minute after catching Leighton Baines' face with his elbow.

Jozy Altidore ended a six-month scoreless streak with a pair of goals, leading the United States over Nigeria 2-1. Altidore tapped in Fabian Johnson's cross in the 31st minute, stopping a 27-match scoreless streak for club and country with his first goal since Dec. 4 for Sunderland against

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FIFA WORLD CUP Brasil

Pele dubs Neymar a genius

GOAL.COM



Brazil icon Pele says he thinks Neymar has improved a great deal since he joined Barcelona and hailed the attacker as a "genius".

The 22-year-old joined the Spanish giants from Santos last summer and picked up 13 goals and 11 assists in La Liga and the Champions League. The youngster is expected to be Brazil's main source of creativity and goals at this summer's World Cup as the South Americans look to take the title for the sixth time.

And Pele, who won the World Cup with Brazil in 1958, 1962 and 1970, feels the forward has developed over the course of the season and feels he can carry the team this summer.

"In 1958, I was only 17 and I played club football in only my country," he told Times of India. "Neymar is 22 and he has the experience of playing in Spain for one year.

"Times have changed now. It helps a player to adapt to different styles of football. I feel Neymar will be a better player following his stint with Barcelona. He has amazing talent.

"And he has the ability to carry the team on his shoulders like he did during the Confederations Cup. The boy is a genius."

The 73-year-old discussed Luiz Felipe Scolari's 23-man squad for the summer showpiece.

"There is a perfect blend of youth and experience. The goalkeeper and defenders are experienced while the attackers and midfielders are on the younger side.

"It helps, since you need more experienced players in defence, while in attack, the youthfulness of the players can make a difference.

"They are not afraid to do something unorthodox and that pays in football. Scolari has been there, done that. He has a towering presence over his players. We certainly can win the hexa at the Maracana."

Pele added he feels there are several teams who can challenge for the world crown this year, listing Argentina, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Uruguay as contenders.

"Germany can do it this time," he added.

"They have been waiting for too many years for their fourth crown. They have a strong side and their footballers have come back from injuries at the right moment, just before the cup."



PHOTO: AFP

The German football team enjoy a ferry ride at the Santa Cruz Cabralia harbour yesterday. They will be based in Santo Andre before launching their World Cup campaign against Portugal on June 16.

Messi lifts Argentina, Villa drives Spain

Ronaldo back in training

REUTERS, New York

Cristiano Ronaldo, suffering with tendinitis around his left knee and an injury to his right thigh, trained with his Portugal team mates on Saturday for the first time since joining the World Cup squad 10 days ago.

Midfielder Raul Meireles was also involved in the session but central defender Pepe continued to train separately, the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) said in a statement.

According to media reports, Ronaldo did not show any limitations during the first 15 minutes of the session which were open to the media.

The World Player of the Year missed the recent friendlies against Greece and Mexico.

Cameroon refuse to board plane

REUTERS, Yaounde

Cameroon's World Cup squad refused to board their scheduled plane to Brazil on Sunday in a strike action over money for the tournament, according to reports.

The team stayed back at their hotel in Yaounde while reporters camped outside the Cameroon Football Federation headquarters for further information.

A charter plane was due to leave Yaounde at 0900 GMT for Brazil, where Cameroon play their opening game of the tournament against Mexico on Friday.

Cameroon players had last week threatened to go on strike until they received promised payment for participating at the World Cup but suspended the strike ahead of their international friendly against Germany last Sunday, the French sports paper L'Equipe reported.

Echiejile out of WC

REUTERS

Defender Elderson Echiejile will miss the World Cup because of an injury suffered in a warm-up match last week, Nigerian officials said on Sunday.

The left back from French club Monaco tore a hamstring in the friendly draw with Greece in Philadelphia on Tuesday and will need a minimum of three weeks to recover.

"We don't have that sort of time to play with," coach Stephen Keshi told reporters after Saturday's 2-1 loss to the United States in Nigeria's last warm-up match before departing for Brazil.

Fellow defender Kenneth Omeruo and winger Ahmed Musa have been passed fit despite both sitting out the defeat by the Americans in Jacksonville.

Nigeria are expected to announce midfielder Ejike Uzoenyi as Echiejile's replacement.