

FACTBOX

Spain lost their opening game of the 2010 World Cup to Switzerland, but went on to become the first team to ever win the tournament having lost their first game.

Vicente Del Bosque has only lost one of his 25 World Cup games as Spain head-coach, including qualifiers. That was against Switzerland (0-1) in 2010.

David Villa is Spain's top scorer at World Cup Finals (eight goals). Spain have won their last six World Cup games.

Spain have kept a clean sheet in each of their last four World Cup games, the longest current run.

Netherlands have made it past the group stages in their last seven previous participations.

Robin van Persie was the top scorer in the 2014 European World Cup qualifiers (11 goals).

The defending champions have only won their first game in three of the last 10 World Cups.



Will Spain's Sergio Ramos (R) carry his stellar Champions League form to the showpiece event in the Brazil? PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

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World and European champions Spain are to compete at the 2014 World Cup with a squad worth 622 million euros, according to transfermarkt. A report by transfermarkt has calculated the total value of the 786 players taking part at the tournament in Brazil at 6.2 billion euros.

Spain's squad is the most expensive at the World Cup, with Honduras' the lowest value at 21.15 million euros. Time magazine reports that transfermarkt determine player market value "by many factors like individual and club team performance, international experience, contract history and age."

Lionel Messi is considered to be worth 120 million euros while Cristiano Ronaldo is worth 100 million euros.

SPAIN V NETHERLANDS

Repeat or revenge?

AFP, Salvador

Holders Spain open their World Cup campaign against the Netherlands on Friday in a repeat of the 2010 final with the Dutch out for revenge.

Andres Iniesta's strike four minutes from the end of extra-time in the Johannesburg final crowned Spain as world champions for the first time and now, four years later, the European giants clash again at Salvador's Arena Fonte Nova in the mouth-watering opening match of Group B.

With South American dark horses Chile and Australia still to come, a win for either side would set the group's agenda.

Captain Robin van Persie, Arjen Robben, Wesley Sneijder, Nigel De Jong and Dirk Kuyt are the five survivors from the 2010 final in the current squad and the

Dutch have made no secret of their desire for revenge.

"It was a big chance for us to win the World Cup and we were really close," said Aston Villa defender Ron Vlaar.

"It should always burn inside to make something right. To play against them now in the first game is a great challenge."

Veteran midfielder Wesley Sneijder, who will win his 100th cap in the match, said the wounds of that defeat were still raw.

"It's like a scar that hasn't yet healed. It always gets me down when I think about it," said the Galatasaray star.

As the double European and reigning world champions, Vicente del Bosque's Spain are bidding to join Brazil and Italy as the only teams to have enjoyed back-to-back World Cup wins.

The ever-loved Del Bosque is

expected to make just one change from the side which started and won the Euro 2012 final with Chelsea's Cesar Azpilicueta coming in for Alvaro Arbeloa at right-back.

Cesc Fabregas should start up front for Spain with Brazil-born Atletico Madrid striker Diego Costa expected to make a second-half appearance on the bench.

"We don't have any fear. But we do have respect," said del Bosque.

"Holland are a well-organised team, well-coached, and I am sure they will make things difficult for us."

Spain can expect a hostile reception in Salvador, judging by last year's Confederations Cup when they were widely booed on their run to the final where they lost 3-0 to hosts Brazil.

Van Persie is expected to be fit, despite arriving in Brazil as an

GPH GPH ispat

injury concern after sustaining a groin problem in last week's 2-0 friendly win over Wales in Amsterdam.

Coach Louis van Gaal has experimented with a 5-3-2 formation designed to close down Spain's potent attack and counter-attack hard.

But the future Manchester United manager used a 4-4-2 formation against the Welsh to keep the Spanish guessing which system he will use in Salvador.

"Much relies for the Dutch on their attacking triumvirate of Van Persie, Arjen Robben and Sneijder, while their defence has been criticised as the team's weak

link.

Spain are wary of their opponents' ability to hit them on the break, warned midfielder Sergio Busquets.

The 25-year-old Barcelona star, who played in the 2010 final, said while most of the team that won the World Cup remained, Holland now have a lot of new young talent.

"We have practically the same players whereas they have had an infusion of new players and a new coach (Louis van Gaal)," said Busquets.

"I have deployed a different system of playing, with five defenders and relying on hitting their opponents on the counter-attack."

"We have to thwart their counter-attacks and also keep a close eye on their most effective players such as Arjen Robben, Robin van Persie and Wesley

MEXICO V CAMEROON
Limped in but ready to run

AFP, Natal

Mercurial Mexico host a troubled Cameroon in the sides' World Cup Group A opener in Natal on Friday looking to take the first step towards an eventual first appearance in the quarterfinals in nearly 30 years.

Now coached by colourful Miguel Herrera, who missed out on playing for Mexico at USA '94 after being dropped for punching a photographer, Mexico have in recent editions failed to live up to expectations.

In the past five tournaments the Aztecs have failed to get to the 'fifth game' and make the quarter-finals they last reached as hosts in 1986 when they bowed out 4-1 on penalties to West Germany.

Critics would argue Mexico should feel lucky to be in Brazil at all.

After a tortuous qualifying campaign, Herrera was parachuted in for a two-legged play-off against New Zealand, which the central Americans won 9-3 on aggregate.

But despite that result, Mexico have hardly lit up the world footballing stage of late, losing their last two friendlies 1-0 to Bosnia and Portugal.

In the latter encounter, Mexico spurned a host of chances and when they took their eye off the ball late on Bruno Alves struck the winner

for Portugal in the 93rd minute.

"We haven't been that convincing when facing goal, so we have to work on it," admitted Herrera. "We have to work on keeping focus all the way to the finish. We can't be losing games in the last 30 seconds."

Mexico, noted for their 5-3-2 formation which focuses heavily on the running of the wingers, will however look to capitalise on the internal strife that has simmered within the Cameroon camp.

Four years after becoming the first African side to leave the 2010 tournament, with zero points from three games, Volker Finke's squad recently threatened to refuse to board the plane to Brazil due to a row over bonuses.

A deal was finally reached, but the episode has enhanced the general feeling that the 'Indomitable Lions' will whimper and not roar their way through a group which includes Croatia and hosts Brazil.

Like Mexico, Cameroon endured a tough qualifying campaign that again underlined the central African country's reputation for internal strife.

Much of that in recent years has revolved around superstar Samuel Eto'o, whom the Cameroon federation once issued with a

lengthy ban.

Although Cameroon possess class midfielders in the shape of Alex Song and Enoch Eyang, all eyes will likely be glued on Chelsea striker Eto'o -- a four-time African Player of the Year who will be appearing in his fourth finals.

"He is an experienced player and a handful to deal with," said Brazil skipper Thiago Silva, of Paris Saint Germain.

"In the Champions League he wasn't 100 percent but he made his presence felt. He has impressive technical abilities and is lethal in the box."

"He is the striker who most worries me."

Finke, who spent 16 years in charge of German over-achievers Freiburg, will be hoping there is still something to play for by the time they meet Brazil on June 23 in Brasilia.

Midfielder Stephane M'Bia, fresh from Europa League triumph with Spanish side Sevilla, insisted to AFP: "Four years ago we were catastrophic. The mood in the camp wasn't good, there were a lot of problems."

"But this time that's not the case. We'll be making our mark on this tournament."



What is Mexico's Javier Hernandez looking at ahead of their clash against Cameroon? PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Tevez switches off WC

AFP, Buenos Aires

Carlos Tevez has admitted he is still suffering after being overlooked by Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella for the World Cup and intends to ignore the four-week long tournament.

The 30-year-old was discarded from the Argentine set-up after missing a penalty in his country's quarterfinal Copa America exit at the hands of eventual winners Uruguay three years ago.

And he said he won't even be watching when the World Cup kicks off with hosts Brazil playing Croatia on Thursday.

"I'm not watching anything, I don't

know how the (Argentina) squad is doing, I've not heard from the group. I don't know anything about anything," said Tevez at a press conference at the Boca Juniors stadium, where he began his football career.

"I'm with my family, I'm playing golf, getting some sun. I'm isolated because I'm a footballer and it hurts."

"I'm not watching what's happening, nor what's going on around (the team), nor anything to do with the World Cup."

Tevez was in fine form this season, his first for Juventus, finishing top scorer for the club with 19 goals as they won their third straight Serie A title.

It was Tevez's fourth title in six years having claimed three Premier

League crowns with Manchester United in 2008 and 2009, and Manchester City in 2012.

Sabella has always refused to broach the subject of Tevez's omission but has kept faith with his quintet of Lionel Messi, Gonzalo Higuain, Sergio Aguiero, Ezequiel Lavezzi and Rodrigo Palacio.

Tevez rejected claims from Argentine legend Diego Maradona that his exclusion from the national team was due to a bust up he had with Argentine Football Association president Julio Grondona and his right-hand man Carlos Bilardo.

"I haven't had any problems with Bilardo, I've never met him, I don't know why Diego said this, he has his

reasons," said Tevez.

"But we mustn't go looking for problems where there aren't any, it's the coach's decision and nothing more."

Tevez left Manchester City a year ago, two years after trying unsuccessfully to orchestrate a move away from the club for "family reasons" and his desire to move closer to his home country.

Although he went on to settle in Turin, he says he still dreams of a return home to Boca.

"I don't know if it's far away but in any case, I still have a bit of gas left. When I see the chance to come back to the club that I love, I'll do it," he said.

'Eng beware of Balotelli curse'

AFP, Manaus

Spurring a bone through his nose, a jaguar's tooth pendant, multicoloured feathers in his ears and tribal body tattoos, not many England fans would give credence to the footballing 'expertise' of Amazonian sorcerer Jararqui.

But the striking Indian 'Paje' believes England's World Cup opener in nearby Manaus on Saturday will be cursed by Italy striker Mario Balotelli.

"Balotelli's magic will help you beat the English," Jararqui, speaking to Italian domestic agency ANSA, said with a serious grin revealing a row of sparkling gold teeth.

"He (Balotelli) is like us coloured people. He's not white, he's not like (Argentina's Lionel) Messi. That's why we love him."

Jararqui's local fame stretches beyond his status as a local leader within Brazil's National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), a government body that establishes and carries out policies relating to indigenous peoples.

Although his tribal affiliation is unknown, by local standards he is wealthy, the rumour going he struck gold on the Parana river where he lives on a houseboat near the city of Santarem.

"For the first time ever the Wai-Wai (tribe) are reaching the highest levels in the league in (the state of) Para, just like the Remo and Paysandu" have in Belem.

"There's a young player in the team who is amazing, a real indian Balotelli."

He may not admit it, but Jararqui's preference may in part be inspired by his dislike for all things Anglo-Saxon.



INFO ZONE

MEXICO	HEAD-TO-HEAD	CAMEROON
1	MATCH	1
1	WIN	0
0	DRAW	0
0	LOST	1

RESULT OF THEIR LAST MEETING: MEXICO 1-0 CAMEROON (22 SEPTEMBER, 1993)

KEY PLAYERS

JAVIER HERNANDEZ	SAMUEL ETO'O
58	117
35	56
0	3

TEAM FORMATION

5-3-2	4-3-2-1
Corona	Itandje
5: Aguilera, Rodriguez, Marquez, Moreno, Layun	4: Chedjou, Mbia, N'Koulou, Bedimo
3: Herrera, Vasquez, Guardado	3: Makouh, Song, Enoch
2: Santos, Peralta	2: Moukanjo, Webo
	1: Eto'o

SPAIN	HEAD-TO-HEAD	NETHERLANDS
9	MATCH	9
4	WIN	4
1	DRAW	1
4	LOST	4

RESULT OF THEIR LAST MEETING: NETHERLANDS 0-1 SPAIN (FINAL, FIFA WORLD CUP 2010)

KEY PLAYERS

IKER CASILLAS	ARJEN ROBBEN
154	85
0	23
0	3

TEAM FORMATION

4-3-3	5-3-2
Castillas	Vorm
4: Azpilicueta, Ramos, Pique, Alba	5: Jaanmat, De Vrij, Vlaar, Martins Indi, Blind
3: Alonso, Xavi, Busquets	3: Clasie, Sneijder, De Guzman
2: Silva, Fabregas, Iniesta	2: Robben, Van Persie

IKER CASILLAS REMAINED UNBEATEN FOR LAST 319 MINUTES FOR SPAIN.

CHILE	HEAD-TO-HEAD	AUSTRALIA
4	MATCH	4
3	WIN	0
1	DRAW	1
0	LOST	3

RESULT OF THEIR LAST MEETING: CHILE 2-1 AUSTRALIA (9 FEBRUARY, 2000)

KEY PLAYERS

ALEXIS SANCHEZ	TIM CAHILL
66	69
22	32
0	3

TEAM FORMATION

3-4-3	4-2-3-1
Bravo	Langkarak
3: Jara, Medel, Gonzalez	4: Neill, McGowan, Milligan, Wilkshire
4: Isla, Vidal, Diaz, Beausejour	2: Bresciano, Jedinak
3: Sanchez, Vargas, Fernandez	3: Oar, Cahill, Kruse
	1: Kennedy

Glory for Spain again?

AFP, Geneva

Defending champions Spain look set to win the World Cup thanks to the interlocking qualities of their squad, which will allow them to outgun Brazil, statisticians said Wednesday.

The Swiss-based CIES Football Observatory said it had taken an in-depth look at the career trajectory of all 32 squads due to lock horns in Brazil from Thursday.

"This approach has allowed us to predict a hypothetical scenario for the outcome of the competition, suggesting that Spain will beat Brazil in the final, with Argentina in third place and France in fourth position," it said.

CIES Football Observatory's experts, who apply econometric methods to all aspects of the game, number-crunched a vast haul of data.

They took into account league matches and goals during each player's career to date, as well as in the last two years, plus national team caps since 2012 and the total number of World Cup games ever played.

Based on that recipe for success, they

combed through all eight World Cup groups to assess who was likely to reach the last 16.

They tipped Brazil to beat the Netherlands in the first knock-out round, while Japan would lose to Italy, France would oust Nigeria, and Portugal would dump out Russia.

In the four other last-16 games, the analysts said that Spain would defeat Croatia, England would elbow out Colombia, Ecuador would lose to Argentina, and that Germany would show Belgium the exit.

That would set up a series of tasty quarter-finals, with Brazil knocking out Italy, France beating Portugal, Spain defeating England, and Germany losing to Argentina.

Brazil would then go on to beat France in the semi-finals, while Argentina would lose to Spain.

It also said that the most competitive groups, statistically, would be Group C, pitting Japan, Colombia, Ivory Coast and Greece, and Group G, made up of Portugal, Germany, the United States and Ghana.

BRAZILIAN BAURU

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

PANDARED CARDED

A team of Chinese baby pandas lined up to predict World Cup scores have been given the red card by authorities hours before kick off, the animals' keepers told AFP Thursday.

The pandas were billed by Chinese media as China's answer to Octopus, after they were originally set to predict match results by picking food from a choice of baskets and by climbing trees.

But representatives at the pandas' breeding base in southwestern Sichuan province said the bears would not be given the chance to predict results at this year's tournament, which begins in Sao Paulo Thursday.

"The predictions have been halted by the authorities," said a spokesman at the China Centre for Research and Conservation of Giant Pandas, without elaborating.

"The predictions have been halted by the authorities," said a spokesman at the China Centre for Research and Conservation of Giant Pandas, without elaborating.

rights had threatened to leave 'Thais without free access to the majority of the games from football's showpiece tournament -- kicking off Thursday in Brazil.

But with the opening ceremony just hours away the television regulator agreed to pay up to \$13 million to local entertainment

watch the games."

POPE WISHES FOOTBALL FANS

Pope Francis, a keen football fan who was an amateur player in his youth in soccer-mad Argentina, on Thursday wished for a fraternal World Cup, hours before the premier championship kicks off in Brazil.

"I wish everyone a wonderful World Cup, played in a spirit of true fraternity," the pontiff tweeted.

In a video message in Portuguese, transmitted by Brazilian television Rete globo, Francis also said he hoped the World Cup would mark "solidarity among peoples" who "recognise themselves as members of the unique human family."

In the video, available on YouTube, he also said that he hoped the competition remains "a game, an occasion for dialogue, comprehension and reciprocal enrichment."

The World Cup is "an event which goes beyond linguistic, cultural or national boundaries," said Francis, adding that he believed there were "three keys" to success in sport: "Training, fair play and respect for your opponent."

A MATS OF THE PEOPLE

He is not as well known as some of his German team mates, nor is he the most successful in the group, but

Rorussia Dortmund centre back Mats Hummels is the most popular of Joachim Loe's 23-man-squad for the World Cup, according to a study carried by the University of Hoffenheim.

"Hummels personifies the charismatic competitor who is always calm and fair," explained Markus Voeth, the man in charge of the internet survey of 929 people.

Hummels topped the list ahead of Bayern Munich trio Manuel Neuer, Philipp Lahm and Thomas Mueller, with his Dortmund team mate Kevin Grosskreutz finishing bottom of the pile.

THE 800KM DOG WALK

"Negro", a dog which went missing two months ago from the Uruguayan seaside resort of Solis, was recently found in Porto Alegre after a 800km journey with four English football supporters.

The group had been walking for three months as part of the "Walk to the World Cup" project. The trek started in Argentina and Negro joined the party from the Uruguayan coast.

The owner tracked the dog down via Facebook photos from the four, who had renamed him "Jefferson". After travelling to Porto Alegre to collect him, Ignacio Etchichury hopes to walk Uruguay play Costa Rica in Fortaleza on Saturday before

company RS to share its live broadcast rights to all 64 matches with public channels.

The move came after the Thai junta pressed the National Broadcasting Telecommunications Commission to resolve the issue.

"RS must broadcast all 64 matches," said commissioner Suthiphon Thaweechaiyagarn.

"Our goal is to allow all Thais to

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