

Mueller backs Loew

AFP, Santo Andre

The German side which confronts the United States in their final group game on Thursday is that of Joachim Loew and not his predecessor and now USA coach Juergen Klinsmann said Germany striker Thomas Mueller on Tuesday.

"We are playing against the United States, not Juergen Klinsmann," said Mueller, who was given his Bayern Munich debut by the 49-year-old.

Klinsmann coached Germany, with Loew as his assistant, at the 2006 World Cup finals hosted by Germany and guided them to the semifinals before leaving the post.

"There are still a few players from Klinsmann's time, but under Joachim Loew a new era has begun," said Mueller, who scored a hat-trick in their opening 4-0 thumping of Portugal.

"He has put his stamp on this team -- and we want to show that against the USA."

A draw in Recife would see the Germans qualify as group winners with the United States finishing runners up -- sending Ghana and Portugal out of the competition.

Team manager Oliver Bierhoff, who worked with Klinsmann for two years, said their friendship will be forgotten for 90 minutes.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A German-American ... USA coach Juergen Klinsmann will have to guide his side against his native team.

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ALGERIA V RUSSIA

Africans eye history

AFP, Curitiba

Algeria can make history by qualifying for the second round of the World Cup for the first time in four appearances at the tournament when they face Russia in Curitiba on Thursday.

The Desert Foxes will be assured of their place in the last 16 with a win, but should also progress with a draw so long as South Korea don't beat the already qualified Belgium by at least three goals in the other match in Group H.

Algeria ended a 32-year wait for a World Cup win in emphatic style with a 4-2 demolition of the Koreans on Sunday, becoming the first African side to ever score four goals in a World Cup game in the process.

Granada midfielder Yacine Brahimi was among those on the scoresheet in Porto Alegre and he is eyeing more glory against a Russian side that has failed to live up to expectations so far.

"It is one of the most important matches of my career, it is a match which can write a new chapter in the history of our country, and that is very much in our heads," he said on Tuesday.

With just a point needed, Bosnian coach Vahid Halilhodzic is likely to tinker with the side that starred against South Korea with Mehdi Lacen and Riyad Mahrez replacing Abdelmoumene Djabou and Carl Medjani.

And captain Madjid Bougherra has urged his side to keep their feet on the ground after the euphoria of finally ending the wait for a World Cup win.

"I'm very proud to be the captain of an Algerian team that has won a World Cup

match for the first time in 32 years," said the former Rangers defender.

"It's a great honour for me to make Algerian footballing history as part of this very close-knit squad who put in an exceptional performance."

"The most important thing is for us to play our own game and also play to our strengths. We have made our fans happy with this win and we now have a chance to make it through to the round of 16, but we need to forget about the victory over Korea first and get our feet back on the ground."

For Fabio Capello's Russia the match represents a final chance to rectify two disappointing results as they were held 1-1 by South Korea before being beaten 1-0 by Divock Origi's winner for Belgium two minutes from time on Sunday.

A lot more had been expected of Capello's men after an impressive record in qualifying, which saw them top their group ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal.

However, defender Aleksei Kozlov is hoping to wipe away the pain of Belgium's late winner by bouncing back against Algeria and securing their passage into the next round.

"It's very difficult to draw any positives when you lose like that," Kozlov told FIFA.com.

"We're all disappointed about what happened late on, but we've still got a chance of continuing in the tournament. While that's the case, we can't start thinking about anything else."

Capello is also expected to make a few changes with CSKA Moscow's Alan Dzagoev and Zenit St Petersburg's Aleksandr Kerzhakov likely to come into the side that

Lamouchi resigns

AFP, Fortaleza

Sabri Lamouchi resigned as Ivory Coast coach minutes after his side's hopes of reaching the World Cup second round were dashed by a late penalty giving Greece a 2-1 victory in Fortaleza on Tuesday.

Greece took a place in the last 16 and Lamouchi said he had to draw the consequences of that failure.

"My contract comes to an end at this World Cup and there will be no epilogue and you can understand well as to why," said the 42-year-old Frenchman.

"It is logical as we did not do well at last year's Africa Cup of Nations or at the World Cup finals."

The former France international, whose side started with a 2-1 win over Japan before losing by that scoreline to group winners Colombia, said a lot of hard work had gone into securing the Elephants first ever appearance in the second round.

"I have put a lot of time and effort into the past two years but unfortunately my story with Ivory Coast ends this evening," he said.

"The outcome is a cruel one but the Greeks did not steal this victory."

USA V GERMANY

Under shadow of 1982

AFP, Recife

The spectre of one of the most infamous episodes in World Cup history looms over Germany and the United States as they clash Thursday for a place in the last 16.

The two teams each have four points heading into their final Group G match and a draw in Recife would see both qualify as the expense of Portugal and Ghana, who play in Brasilia.

The sense of intrigue has been heightened by the fact that Germany coach Joachim Loew and the United States' boss Juergen Klinsmann are old friends.

The match scenario has evoked memories of a notorious 1982 World Cup game between Austria and West Germany.

That match in the Spanish city of Gijon ended in controversy after the two sides effectively conspired to secure a 1-0 victory for the Germans, allowing them to qualify ahead of Algeria.

The shockwaves from that encounter continue to be felt today.

FIFA subsequently changed the rules, ordering that all final games in the group phase of the World Cup should kick-off simultaneously.

Press conferences for Germany and the United States this week have been littered with references to the 1982 scandal, with Klinsmann forcefully rejecting any suggestion of an arrangement this time.

"You're talking about a game that is decades ago," Klinsmann said when asked about the match known as the 'Disgrace of Gijon'.

"That is only a part of Germany's history and not part of the United States' history. I think if you look at the past of the US team, we always try to make things happen," Klinsmann added.

"We have that fighting spirit, and we give everything in every game. We will go to

Recife and we will give everything to beat Germany. That is our goal."

Germany's coaching staff and players also dismiss repeated questions about the possibility of anything untoward.

"I can only say a concrete 'no', we've already said we want to win the game and that's how we'll play over 90 minutes," assistant coach Hansi Flick said.

Germany's centre back Mats Hummels said the Germans had no interest in anything other than a victory.

"It would be unsportsmanlike to do that and not fair, besides we want to win the game," he added.

"We're not playing for any result other



than a victory."

Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff also dismissed the possibility of collusion to. "We want to win. Everything else is uninteresting."

A draw on Thursday would see Germany finish on top of Group G, ahead of the United States on goal difference.

Klinsmann's side are still kicking themselves over their failure to clinch a remarkable qualification on Sunday in their thrilling 2-2 draw with Portugal.

A brilliant header by Portugal's Silvestre Varela in the final seconds of stoppage time denied the United States a win which would have seen them qualify.

SOUTH KOREA V BELGIUM

Need to win and win big

AFP, Sao Paulo

Struggling South Korea will need to rediscover the magical spirit of 2002 as they fight to rescue their dismal World Cup campaign against unbeaten Belgium on Thursday.

After drawing with Russia and losing 4-2 to Algeria, Group H's bottom side need to win big against already-qualified Belgium if they are to stay in the tournament.

Logic decrees the Koreans will soon be following Japan home as their attack has been largely toothless so far, coupled with severe problems in defence.

But coach Hong Myung-Bo can draw at least on his experiences at the 2002 tournament, when he was part of the team that shocked the world by reaching the semifinals.

That year, the unquenchable desire of Guus Hiddink's team and some favourable refereeing decisions helped the Taeguk Warriors upset Portugal, Italy and Spain.

This time around, things have been different. The 1-1 draw with Russia owed much to Igor Akinfeev's goalkeeping howler, and South Korea were then taken apart by unfancied Algeria.

"Now we have to turn the page," said Hong after the Algeria defeat. "This result is the reward for our preparation. We must prepare better for the next game, it's our only option."

On-loan Arsenal striker Park Chu-Young remains goalless and Hong had some choice words for his defence after they conceded three in the first half against Algeria.

In South Korea's favour is that Belgium, who are top of the table with maximum points, are expected to rest some of their first-choice players.

Centre-back Thomas Vermaelen looks set to miss out with a hamstring strain but coach Marc Wilmots may give more game time to Chelsea's Eden Hazard, who is yet to hit top form.

"I haven't played well yet at this World Cup but I've made a difference and that's what the coach has asked of me," Hazard said this week.

"I understand that people expect a lot of me and I know I can do better."

Although Belgium have a spine of top-level stars in Thibaut Courtois, Vincent Kompany, Hazard, Marouane Fellaini and Romelu Lukaku, it's a new face who has been making headlines.

Divock Origi, 19, from Hazard's former club Lille, is the latest headline-maker off the production line with two sparkling substitute appearances including the winner against Russia.

KEY STATS

World Player-of-the-Year Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal is taking part in his sixth major tournament and has scored at least once in each of the previous five.

Goalless in his two outings in Brazil, he can equal the European record of scoring in six major tournaments, held by former Germany striker and current US coach Juergen Klinsmann.

Portugal came within about 30 seconds of an early exit at the hands of the United States in Manaus on Sunday when Silvestre Varela headed home Ronaldo's cross to salvage a draw.

Asamoah Gyan's goal for Ghana against Germany took his World Cup tally to five and equalled the all-time African top scorer in the tournament, Cameroon's Roger Milla.

PORTUGAL V GHANA

Portugal stare at the abyss

AFP, Brasilia

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal face a sobering early World Cup exit on Thursday even if their world footballer-of-the-year produces pyrotechnics in their final group game against Ghana.

The Real Madrid player came to the World Cup bracketed alongside Argentina's Lionel Messi and Brazil's Neymar as one of a triumvirate of true global superstars.

But while the Barcelona pair have produced moments of sublime skill and goals, the attention surrounding Ronaldo has mainly focused on the health or otherwise of his troublesome left knee.

Portugal -- fourth in the FIFA world rankings -- are rock-bottom of Group G with a solitary point from their matches against Germany and the United States, both of whom have four points.

They were pummeled 4-0 by Germany and the fact they still have any chance of progressing at all is down to Ronaldo, who delivered a sublime cross for their equaliser in a 2-2 draw against the United States.

Despite that goal, headed in by Silvestre Varela in the dying seconds of time added on, the cold, hard reality is that if the United States and Germany draw in Recife, Portugal and Ghana, who also have one point, are doomed.

Portugal have insisted throughout the tournament that their star player is fit but he has failed to dominate matches in the way he does for his club and admitted that his side's task is "virtually impossible".

Ronaldo was sanguine after the match against the Americans, admitting that Portugal, despite their lofty ranking, were never among the favourites to lift the World Cup.

"I never thought we would be world

champions. We have to be humble and recognise our limitations. There are things we cannot do, like running faster or having more quality," he said.

"At the moment there are better teams and better players than our own," added the 29-year-old, who had an outstanding season for Real that culminated in a 10th Champions League title for the club.

Paulo Bento's side have also had to cope with a one-match suspension for defender Pepe after a red card in the Germany match and an injury to Fabio Coentrao that ruled him out of the rest of the tournament.

Portugal's task is made all the more difficult by their goal difference of minus four, meaning they must score a handful of goals even to be in the mix. Ghana's goal difference is minus one.

And they are unlikely to have it all their own way when they take on Ghana in Brasilia after the Black Stars gave Germany a fright before Miroslav Klose equalised to rescue a 2-2 draw.

Despite that setback Ghana, who reached the quarterfinals in South Africa in 2010, still harbour hopes of progressing to the round of 16.

The exact make-up of the team is difficult to predict after Ghana coach Kwesi Appiah made four changes for the Germany match from the side that lost their opening game to the United States, bringing in Schalke star Kevin-Prince Boateng, although he was taken off early in the second-half.

"We ran ourselves into the ground and played really well against a team of the calibre of Germany," said defender Harrison Afful.

"We've still got a game to go and we're going to give it our all to go through. If we don't qualify, it won't be for lack of effort."

Kagawa blasts pathetic exit

AFP, Tokyo

Japan playmaker Shinji Kagawa slammed the team's World Cup elimination as "pathetic" after Tuesday's 4-1 thrashing by Colombia in their final group game.

"It hurts to go out like this," the Manchester United player told Japanese television broadcast on Wednesday. "I don't have any other words. I feel responsible and deeply sorry. It's pathetic."

A three-goal blitz by Colombia in the second half ended Japan's slender hopes of reaching the knockout stage in Brazil after a 2-1 defeat by Ivory Coast and a 0-0 draw with Greece.

Japan's talismanic midfielder Keisuke Honda, who had declared defiantly that the Asian champions could win the World Cup, cut a forlorn figure after the match.

"It's embarrassing," he said, pain etched across his face and fighting back tears.

"After I'd said Japan would win the tournament, in the end it finished with just empty talk," added Honda, who dismissed talk of international retirement.

"I said from the start that I intended on going to the next [tournament]. We simply weren't good enough at this World Cup."



PHOTO: REUTERS

It's about time he stood up ... Portugal will have to rely not only on their superstar Cristiano Ronaldo against Ghana but also on the result of the other match between USA and Germany.

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'South Americans have advantage'

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Hosting the World Cup in Brazil has given South American nations the edge over European counterparts, France coach Didier Deschamps said Tuesday.

"It is complicated. Several major European nations have been or could be eliminated in the first round," said Deschamps ahead of France's final Group E match against Ecuador at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium on Wednesday.

"We are in Brazil, so the South American teams certainly acclimatise better, and maybe the fact that they are playing so close to home and have so many supporters with them gives them added strength and energy."

France have romped to two victories against Honduras and Switzerland, scoring eight goals in the process, and even a defeat against Ecuador is unlikely to deny them a last 16 place.

The Netherlands, Belgium and Greece have all secured berths in the knockout stages, and Germany are well placed to join them.

However, World Cup holders Spain, England, and four-time winners Italy have been dumped out of the contest.

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