



The Spaniards, including coach Fernando Hierro, were in great mood ahead of their round of 16 clash against Russia today. However, the hosts have a secret weapon in Denis Cheryshev, who has already scored three goals at this World Cup and, having grown up in Spain, knows their football inside and out. PHOTO: COLLECTED/AFP

স্বপ্নের গাড়ি জন্ম দিচ্ছে

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In-form hosts take on misfiring favourites

REUTERS, Moscow

A World Cup last-16 match between Spain and Russia would have seemed like a woeful mismatch a month ago but Sunday's game in Moscow is now much more difficult to call thanks to the 2010 winners' underwhelming campaign and the hosts' blistering start.

Spain's preparations for the World Cup were thrown into turmoil after coach Julen Lopetegui was sacked and replaced by Fernando Hierro just days before the start of the tournament.

Hierro's side topped Group B but picked up only five points.

Russia, the lowest ranked team in the tournament, dispelled the doom and gloom by blitzing Saudi Arabia 5-0 and beating Egypt 3-1 to reach the knockout phase for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While Stanislav Cherchesov's side were brought back to earth by a 3-0 defeat to Uruguay, they could cause Spain problems at a partisan Luzhniki stadium if they can rediscover the energy that propelled them to those first two group wins.

Spanish defender Dani Carvajal says his side, who drew 3-3 with Portugal and 2-2 with Morocco, must tighten up at the back against the Russians.

"On Sunday we have a very difficult game against the host nation, who scored eight goals in two games and

who will have the whole country behind them," Carvajal said.

"Russia is a strong and quick team and we have to be very wary of giving the ball away. We have to be very focused and set ourselves up to exploit their weaknesses and capitalise on their errors."



However, Carvajal said teams will be forced to attack more in the knockout stages, where he expects Spain to come out from the shadows and up their game.

"From now on the games are life or death, you can't play for a draw, you either win or you go home," he said.

"I think these games are going to be different and we will recover our best form."

Spain and Russia played out a thrilling 3-3 draw in a friendly last November, while their last competitive meeting came at the Euro 2008 semi-finals, where the Spaniards ran out 3-0 winners.

Russia's veteran defender Sergei Ignashevich is one of three surviving members of that team in the current squad, and he said his side had studied how Iran and Morocco managed to trouble Spain defensively.

"Their defenders try to get high up the pitch and that leads to a lot of free space and allows you to create danger on the counterattack," he said.

"That was one of Spain's biggest weaknesses in the group stage, Morocco and Iran used that strategy and we will try to do it too."

Russia coach Stanislav Cherchesov added that he would look to be a "God" by inflicting more misery on Hierro and Spain. Cherchesov was in goal when Spartak Moscow dumped a Real Madrid side containing a young Hierro out of the Champions League in 1991, 3-1 on aggregate.

He said: "At that time, Spanish teams were favourites but, to use a Russian expression, 'anyone can be God if he tries to'. Fernando Hierro was a good player and now he's a good coach. We won against the Spanish team and on hopefully on Sunday we can repeat that success and prove our worth."

'Russia can hurt Spain'

AFP, Moscow

Russia's World Cup topscorer Denis Cheryshev says the hosts can hurt 2010 winners Spain in the last 16 on Sunday despite the huge disparity in talent between the two teams.

Russia entered the tournament as the lowest-ranked side, at 70th in the world, but comprehensive wins over Saudi Arabia and Egypt have boosted expectations. Now they must find a way past title contenders Spain to prolong their run after reaching the knockout phase for the first time in the post-Soviet era.

Villarreal winger Cheryshev, who has scored three goals so far, is looking to exploit a surprisingly suspect Spain defence.

Fernando Hierro's side have conceded five goals in three matches, with questions in particular over the form of Manchester United goalkeeper David de Gea.

"That's my intention as a forward," said Cheryshev. "Spain have some great players and might even be the best team in the world, in any case they're close to being the best. But any team can hurt another and we'll certainly do our best."

Cheryshev is no stranger to Spanish football, having spent most of his life in the country and come up through the Real Madrid youth system.

"I'm sure we're going to have a hard time and I repeat we know they're excellent and can play very well," he said. "But we also have our assets and we'll have to take advantage of them."

"However, I think that we can win against anybody, we can always win and that's what we need to believe, just think about victory."

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'Germany can rise again'

AGENCIES, Berlin

Germany failed at the World Cup but will "get up again" for future challenges, says Ilkay Gundogan.

For the first time since 1938, Germany suffered elimination from the World Cup at the first round following a dramatic 2-0 loss to South Korea - Sweden and Mexico instead advancing from Group F.

"We are all still so disappointed. We had big plans, but we failed," Gundogan posted on Twitter.

"I'm proud to have played for the 1st time for [Germany] at a World Cup, but to exit in the group stage is nothing but frustrating.

"We have to get up again for the challenges after the summer break - and we will."

No Day of the Dead parade for Mexico

REUTERS, Moscow

Mexican soccer fans called off a Day of the Dead-themed parade in Moscow's Red Square on Friday after communist lawmakers objected to the event being held so close to Lenin's tomb.

A carnival atmosphere has taken over parts of the capital as thousands of fans pack to watch the soccer World Cup.

Mexican fans - whose team is one of the 16 to make it through to the knock-out stages - had planned a party in the zone set aside for them in the city, followed by a street parade to Red Square several hundred metres away.

But one of the organisers said they were told by authorities after midday on Friday to hold the parade and event indoors, declining to explain why.

Sergei Malinkovich, deputy head of the Communists of Russia party, said people dressed as skeletons - one of the traditional symbols of the Mexican annual holiday at which families honour their

dead loved ones - should not be allowed to march on what his party has called "hallowed" ground.

"Why should we have some kind of skulls there?" Malinkovich said.

"Crowds of Mexicans would have passed by wearing costumes of smiling skeletons, jumping, dancing, tooting horns, ringing bells, flirting, and playing love games," Malinkovich told AFP.

The body of Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin lies embalmed in a marble tomb on the square and Soviet leaders and dignitaries are buried in the Kremlin walls.

Malinkovich's party had appealed to the Interior Ministry to stop fans holding the parade, he said, arguing it could provoke violent clashes with Russian patriots.

"Russian people on the square would almost certainly have tried to stop them. There would have been conflicts to say the least, and perhaps clashes," he said.

The event - held four months before the celebrations in Mexico - was to be held in the fan area.



Spain defender Sergio Ramos was extremely relaxed ahead of the Russia game, adding to his bag of tricks as he perhaps seeks a goal. PHOTO: COLLECTED