

Brazil's training session yesterday had all the elements of fun that it usually does, but the Selecao will be hoping to bring that joy to the field and excite fans with their football in their round of 16 clash against Mexico today. If they do, then Guillermo Ochoa (L) will certainly have his hands full.

PHOTO: REUTERS



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Neymar primed for Mexico encounter, says Tite

AGENCIES, Sochi

Brazil coach Tite says Neymar is back to his best as the five-time champions take on Mexico here on Monday for a place in the World Cup quarterfinals.

Neymar has made a slow start to the tournament, showing glimpses of skill but drawing criticism for diving in an attempt to win a penalty against Costa Rica.

But the Paris Saint-Germain forward has steadily silenced his detractors, scoring Brazil's second goal in a laboured 2-0 win over Costa Rica before providing the corner for Thiago Silva's powerful header that capped a valuable 2-0 win over Serbia.

Four years after a 7-1 humiliation by eventual champions Germany in the semifinals, Brazil have emerged as one of the most rounded teams still in the competition. And Neymar, said Tite, is more than ready following his return from a lengthy injury lay-off shortly before the tournament.

"Now, he's returned to a very high level," Tite said at Samara Arena on Sunday. "He's played a lot... I told him, and he knows, about the price he's had to pay to get back to this level. "We knew he would need to play a few games, but he's back."

Neymar's emotional state has also come under scrutiny after he broke down in tears on the pitch after the win over Costa Rica. Tite, however, would not be drawn on whether he had addressed these issues with the player.



"A coach praises publicly and will not say what happens in the dressing room," he told reporters when asked if he had spoken to Neymar about his state of mind.

Tite meanwhile confirmed his starting 11 on the eve of the match, bringing in Filipe Luis for Marcelo, who hobbled off with back spasms against Serbia. Tite said Marcelo had been desperate to play in the last 16 clash.

"We can't take any risks in such an important game. We don't pay for health care," Tite said. Meanwhile, Brazil defensive linchpin Thiago Silva said he hoped Neymar would follow in the footsteps of PSG team-mates Kylian Mbappe, Edinson Cavani and Angel Di Maria, who scored

five goals between them in Saturday's last 16 games.

"Yesterday when the games finished I thought... maybe in our game it's going to be the same with Neymar," Silva said. "We hope we'll be as inspired as those other strikers."

Silva added that his team had effectively been playing knockout football since their second match at the World Cup, so it would be business as usual today. While the knockout stage brings an extra level of jeopardy and tension to the tournament, Silva expects his team mates to take it in their stride.

"Since we drew in the first match it has been a knockout, that is how we see it," the towering centre back told reporters on Sunday.

Neymar may well be the centre of attention as Brazil chase a record sixth World Cup triumph in Russia.

But if the South Americans successfully emulate the class of 1958 by winning a World Cup on European soil, there is a strong likelihood that their rock-solid defence will have something to do with it.

"In football there is always one player who gets spoken about more. But you need to have a very good team," said Casemiro, the formidable Real Madrid defensive midfielder, this week.

"It is inevitable that people will say the player we have who is above average is Neymar, but we cannot forget that we have other great players."

Osorio plans to attack

REUTERS, Samara

Mexico boss Juan Carlos Osorio believes the way to take on Brazil, whom he labelled the "best team in the world", in the last 16 of the World Cup is for his side to adhere to their attacking philosophy.

The two nations meet in Samara on Monday with Mexico looking to replicate the performance that saw them defeat holders Germany in the group stage. However, they will be up against a team with an embarrassment of riches, including Neymar, Philippe Coutinho, Thiago Silva and Gabriel Jesus.

"Brazil is a great team. I would go as far as to say it is the best team in the world," Osorio told reporters on Sunday. "Each and every one of their players can control the ball and pass the ball very well. They behave like a unit.

"This will be a great opportunity for Mexican football to face the best team on the planet and we will have to play to our full potential."

Osorio believes the best way to counter the Brazilian threat is through Mexico's own offensive tactics.

"Our footballing style has to do more with creating defensive problems in the opposition line," he said. "So we never give up on attacking. Regardless of the structure we will have tomorrow we will always have a line-up with five attacking players or four pure attackers and two false nines like Hector [Herrera].

"Football as a game always gives you an opportunity to win. Collectively, it is the sport that gives the team with less history a chance because of the low scoring," said Osorio.

Argentina need magic

World Cup Football Quiz-2018

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AL-AMIN from Samara

The departure of Lionel Messi and his Argentina side from the World Cup on Saturday following a 4-3 defeat against France was something that the Albiceleste fans either had not seen coming or refused to accept.

The team played well in that defeat and could have even won had it not been for the brilliance of one Kylian Mbappe on the Les Bleus side. But even if they had progressed, the Albiceleste would remain suspect in regards to their ability to lift the cup. And even if they would have gone all the way it would not have been fair as far as the beautiful game is concerned.

It is fair to say that Argentina are the most colourful side in the World Cup. But at the same time, they are emotional, which often belies logic. The difference of opinion between the coaching staff and the players led by Messi unfolded a lot of funny stories after their chastening 3-0 defeat against Croatia, where the ageing defence went into hiding. True that a three-back formation of coach Jorge Sampaoli backfired against the Croats, but it hardly addressed the crux of the prob-

lem of a golden generation. A late goal against Nigeria appeared to have put Argentina's World Cup back on track, but it only served as a false dawn and turned into a nightmare a few days later.

When we talk about Argentina, the image of Diego Maradona and his magnificent exploits in the 1986 World Cup come to the fore. And Argentines want Messi to emulate Maradona whenever he walks onto the pitch sporting the national shirt. This is asking too much even of the best player in the world. Aren't you expecting something that you did not expect of Maradona when he won the title?

Not only that, the whole effort of Argentina was solely focused on Messi. If Messi fails, Argentina fails, and if Messi's magic works, Argentina prevail. Sampaoli made no secret about that.

"I think we adopted to necessity rather then having a clear concept that we have to win. So that is maybe stronger than our football concept. We have the best player in the world and we have to try and create collective situations that allows us to really use that player who can bring that momentum. We manage our tactics surrounding him --

we tried to use everything that we have to allow him to what he can.
Sometimes we did that, sometimes we did not," Sampaoli told reporters after his side's elimination from the World Cup.

So where is Plan B when Messi is neutralised? Argentina also do not have many players coming out through the youth system and it was acknowledged by the Argentine journalists who were travelling from Moscow to Kazan. During that discussion they also gave

During that discussion they also gave the impression that Sampaoli is a rubbish coach and they do not even need a coach to win games. The remarks were interesting from a very knowledgeable section of the Argentine media. It was also a shame to see the way they belittled their coach since the Croatia defeat.

Football is a game of 11 players and the manager or coach plays a very important role. And more importantly, it is a game where the pack needs a wolf, not the wolf needing the pack --Brazil coach Tite will tell you.

Messi may play one more World Cup. But his and Argentina's dream will remain a distant reality if they keep on looking for magic instead of creating a team that shows magic.



Brazil's 'left-back/playmaker' Marcelo returned to training yesterday, but is unlikely to start the match against Mexico today.

PHOTO: REUTERS