




Bird's eye view

Patrick Naggi

Tunisians carry hope for Africa

The 2-0 drubbing of Kenya by Tunisia last year, in an empty stadium during a World Cup qualifier, is a bitter experience still fresh in the minds of local fans.

But such ill feelings will be set aside today when Tunisia take on Saudi Arabia in a mission to salvage the image of the continent.

Under the tutelage of coach Roger Lemmere, Tunisians' ability to cause upsets cannot be ruled out, if they take the path of Morocco, who blanked Scotland 3-0 in the 1998 World Cup, or match their team of 1978, which beat Mexico 3-1.

Tunisia will be under intense pressure to deliver an African victory after other continental representatives made notable but not good performances in the 2006 world Cup.

Sterling performance

I still believe African teams displayed a sterling performance, despite Cote d'Ivoire going down 1-2 to Argentina; Angola losing 0-1 to Portugal; Ghana's 0-2 loss to Italy and Togo's 1-2 loss to South Korea yesterday.

Tunisia are increasingly seen as saviours in a decisive way, provided they clear the first hurdle today.

The team is good in all departments. The defence is marshalled by Khaled Bhadra, Jose Clayton, Radhi Jaidi and Hatem Trabelsi with Ali Boumnijel in goal. Midway, Salim Benachour, Riadh Bouazizi, Adel Chedli, and Karim Hagui are solid and have the bite. The offensive force of Dos Santos, Ziad Jiaziri and Ali Zitouni will chart the path Africa has to take in coming days.

Not short of imports, Tunisia prides in the Brazilian duo of striker Franciluedo Dos Santos and Jose Clayton in defence.

Tough group

Tunisia were pitted in a tough qualifying group with Harambee Stars, Morocco, Guinea and Botswana. Tunisia also represented Africa during the Confederations Cup in 2005, after having emerged winners of the African Cup of Nations Championship in 2004.

The Saudis, too, have a similar mission, coated with Sh10 million for each player as a sweetener from their government if they proceed to the second stage.

Saudi Arabia, under Brazilian Marcus Paqueta, have the likes of Sami Al-Jaber and Mabrouk Zaid and goalkeeper Mohammed Al Deya. This will also be Sami Al Jaber's fourth World Cup attempt.

The writer is the Sports Manager at Exclamation Marketing Ltd. He is also a former Harambee Stars team manager and a CAF Coaching Instructor



Photo/Reuters

Ukraine's star forward Andriy Shevchenko at a training session.

Switzerland hold France to tame draw

Arsenal ace Henry fires blanks

STUTTGART

France were held to a 0-0 draw by Switzerland last night, bringing back memories of their early exit from the last tournament four years ago.

The last time the French team scored in a World Cup game was when they beat Brazil 3-0 in the 1998 final. Switzerland also held France to draws in two qualifying games.

Despite being forced to play as a lone striker, Thierry Henry went close with three shots and a header in the first half, while Zinedine Zidane's deft touches set up the best French moves.

Switzerland almost went ahead in the 23rd minute, however, when Tranquillo Barnetta sent a free kick into the area but Philippe Senderos and Alexander Frei both failed to get a touch and the ball hit the post.

Fabien Barthez, one of five players who won the World Cup with France in 1998, rescued Les Bleus with a near-post block to keep out a header from Switzerland substitute Daniel Gygax in the 65th minute.

France coach Raymond Domenech gave Henry some help by sending on Manchester United striker Louis Saha with 20 minutes to go.

France lost to Senegal and Denmark at the last World Cup and left after the first round.

Line-ups

France: Fabien Barthez, Willy Sagnol, Lilian Thuram, William Gallas, Eric Abidal, Patrick Vieira, Claude Makelele, Franck Ribery (Louis Saha, 70th), Zinedine Zidane, Sylvain Wiltord (Vikash Dhorasoo, 84th), Thierry Henry.

Switzerland: Pascal Zuberbuehler, Ludovic Magnin, Philippe Senderos, Philipp Degen, Patrick Mueller (Johan Djourou, 75th), Johann Vogel, Tranquillo Barnetta, Ricardo Cabanas, Raphael Wicky (Xavier Margairaz, 82nd), Alexander Frei, Marco Streller (Daniel Gygax, 56th).

Doubts over the fitness of Ukraine goal machine Andriy Shevchenko and question marks over Spain's strikers

Akwa wants strike partner

BIELEFELD, Germany

Angola's team captain Akwa has called for a second striker to help him improve their potency in attack after they fell 1-0 in their World Cup Group D opener to Portugal.

Coach Luis Oliveira Goncalves plumped for a lone striker for Sunday's

match against Portugal, which Angola lost 1-0, abandoning the 4-4-2 formation which let them down badly during the African Nations Cup in January.

"I think the coach will use the same tactic but for me it is better with two strikers because I feel I have more support," Akwa told Reuters by telephone from the team's training camp in Celle on Monday. (Reuters)

have dominated the build-up to today's clash between the two favourites to qualify from Group H. Former European Footballer of the Year Shevchenko has been nursing a knee injury and his participation against Spain will remain in doubt until the last minute.

The 29-year-old scored as a substitute in Thursday's 3-0 warm-up win over Luxembourg and has looked sprightly in training but Shevchenko has suggested that he will not be fully fit until their second match against Saudi Arabia on June 19.

"I'm working with the squad and I'm feeling quite good," he said. "This period is important for me as I have to work to get in better shape, possibly not for the first match but for the ones after."

Captain and all-time leading goalscorer Raul (left) looks headed for a place on the bench



Coach Oleg Blokhin could delay a decision on whether the striker plays in today's game until as late as one hour before kick-off. Spain come into the World Cup with the longest unbeaten run of the 32 finalists, having gone 22 games since their last loss and their preparations appear to have gone like clockwork but the jury is still out on the form of their forwards.

Captain and all-time leading goalscorer Raul looks headed for a place on the bench after failing to rediscover his touch since a serious knee injury while Fernando Torres, David Villa and Luis Garcia are favourites to start up front.

The trio have, however, only managed one goal between them in three warm-up games and despite their undoubted class have yet to show the necessary killer instinct.

Argentine-born defender Mariano Perna should start at left back just a week after his goalscoring debut in a friendly with Croatia, while Marcos Senna, Xabi Alonso and Xavi look to be the first choice midfield. (Agencies)


MOTOROLA

MOTOFEVER