

Spain hope to end decades of World Cup pain

DAVID LEGGIE

The exclusive FIFA World Cup winners club could welcome a new member come mid-year with Spain favoured to win the first tournament staged by Africa.

They are reigning European champions, serial winners of competitive and friendly games, boast a wily manager in Vicente del Bosque, and a galaxy of Barcelona and Real Madrid stars like Xavi and captain Iker Casillas.

Add Cesc Fabregas and Fernando Torres from the English Premiership elite and it is no surprise that 'Red Fury' have been installed as 4-1 favourites to lift the trophy on July 11 at the 90,000-seat Johannesburg Soccer City stadium.

Spain face Chile, Switzerland and Honduras in a first round group that should not prove overly taxing and finishing first may set up an eventful second round showdown against Cristiano Ronaldo-inspired Portugal.

Ronaldo and company

would represent the first potential banana skin for a country that has so often flattered only to deceive at the tournament with fourth the best finish, and that was 60 years ago.

Should Spain succeed at a World Cup that kicks off on June 11 and is being hosted by nine South African cities, they will join Argentina, Brazil, England, Germany, Italy, France and Uruguay as champions.

But whichever nation claims the 30-million-dollar prize and world football bragging rights, South Africa will also be winners with a glittering line-up of national teams and stars on show.

Only Croatia, Russia and Egypt are missing from the top 20 national teams in the world and Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic is alone among the 23 stars shortlisted for the 2009 FIFA World Footballer of the Year in not making it.



The Spain squad

Americas, South Africans are relishing the prospect of seeing live the heroes they watch weekly on TV. The winter chill will give way to unbridled excitement from Polokwane to Cape Town as Lionel Messi, Wayne Rooney, Arjen Robben, Ronaldo, Kaka, Franck Ribery, Fer-

nando Torres, Samuel Eto'o and Didier Drogba strut their stuff. All the former winners bar Uruguay are potential challengers to Spain along with the Netherlands as Brazil seek a record sixth title and England their first since the late Bobby Moore lifted the Cup 44 years ago.

Argentina have Messi, Brazil Kaka, England Rooney, Germany legendary fighting spirit, Italy streetwise warriors, and France tradition having qualified for two of the previous three finals, winning one.

South Africa prepare to welcome about 300,000 visitors 80 years after Uruguay hosted and won the first World Cup with the 12 challengers sailing to Montevideo.

The last team to defeat Spain were the United States on a freezing South African night last June in a

FIFA Confederations Cup semi-final, so count the 'Stars and Stripes' among potential party poopers.

Others are Cameroon, Chile, Denmark, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mexico, Nigeria, Paraguay, Portugal, Serbia and Uruguay - none strong enough to go all the way, but all capable of embarrassing a more formidable foe.

All 19 World Cup hosts - Japan and South Korea shared the 2002 tournament - reached the second round and this offers a glimmer of hope to lowly South Africa, who rely heavily on Everton midfielder Steven Pienaar.

Ranked 90 in the world, Bafana Bafana (The Boys) face a mammoth task to maintain that record with a place among the top seeds proving of little assistance as they must face 2006 runners-up France, Mexico and Uruguay.

The draw offered no favours to Africa with Drogba-inspired Ivory Coast in the same group as Brazil and Portugal and Ghana, whose midfield dynamo Michael Essien is

battling to be fit, getting Germany, Serbia and Australia. Victory over Denmark should see Cameroon through to the last 16 and while not the force of old, Nigeria can defy the odds and advance by finishing above equally modest rivals Greece and South Korea.

After the heroics of 2002 semi-finalists South Korea, no Asia qualifier got beyond the first round in Germany four years ago and the outlook this time is equally bleak with 125-1 shot Australia most likely to upset the bookmakers.

Central America could have two sides in the last 16 - Mexico and the United States - but Honduras appear condemned to an early exit 28 years after their only previous appearance.

And when all the drama ends on July 11, one World Cup record will surely remain intact. Frenchman Just Fontaine scored 13 goals in 1958 and even mesmerising Messi and rampant Rooney can hardly hope to better that.

JOHANNESBURG, AFP

Fever pitch: Football's just a game... isn't it?

RICHARD INGHAM

The World Cup's official message is this football is a vehicle of harmony, uniting all nations in peace under the banner of sport.

What if the truth were not so pretty? What if, instead of healing national wounds and bringing people together, the World Cup did the reverse?

In a 1945 essay, written after a bruising tour of Britain by Moscow Dynamo, George Orwell argued that a dangerous orgy of patriotism develops when flags are waved, anthems sung and a country elevates its team to the status of national champion.

"At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare," he said. Many may contest this as distorted and offer plenty of examples where friendship and camaraderie flourished among strangers thanks to a big footy event.

Yet Pele's "beautiful game" also has an undeniable ugly side, studied by episodes of violence among crowds and sporadic tensions among countries.

"There's a dual message sent out," said Richard Giulianotti, a professor of applied social sciences at Britain's Durham University.

"One is the message of 'back the nation fully' and the other is the universal message of sport, the value of fair play, respect for the opponent and so on. They obviously sit in opposition to each other."

In late 19th-century Britain, the rise of football clubs was followed by the first hooliganism in the modern game. It became a cancer in English football in the 1970s and early 80s and is a problem in many countries today.

Egypt and Algeria last year swapped diplomatic and political blows over friendly qualifying matches to the World Cup that saw several Algerian players injured by stone-throwing fans and retaliation against Egyptians in Algeria.

A widely-forgotten footnote in history is the "Football War" - a real-life, four-day conflict in 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras whose relationship had already been soured by illegal immigration and other problems.

After El Salvador lost the first round of World Cup qualifier 1-0, an 18-year-old girl, Amelia Bolanos, shot herself through the heart out of grief.

In an instant, Bolanos became a national martyr, her funeral attended by the head of state and football team.

When the Honduras squad arrived for the return match in San Salvador, they had to be escorted by armoured vehicles and protected by soldiers wielding sub-machine guns. As the local crowd jeered, the organisers burned the Honduran flag and hoisted a "dirty dishrag" in its place, according to contemporary accounts.

After Honduras' 3-0 humiliation, the stage was set for a vicious war that left between 2,000 and 6,000 people dead.

So is top-flight football a sublimated form of conflict? Is it, to use the words of the great Dutch coach

Rinus Michels, "something like war?" After all, very nature of soccer is adversarial.

Militaristic words such as captain, lieutenant, victory, defeat, striker, marksman, strategy and shield - all illustrate the nature of a sport that is fluid and fast-moving, yet combative and strategic at the same time.

Sociologists caution that a special set of ingredients is required to propel a match from a simple game to a question of national honour that can unleash violence, suicide and diplomatic fisticuffs or worse.

The big factor is the creation of the "in-group" - in essence, a form of tribalism in which people have a common identity or loyalty, which causes them to raise emotional investment in a match.

To be in a soccer "in-group" does not mean you have to automatically create an "out-group" to which you are hostile, explained Clifford Stott, a social psychologist at Britain's University of Liverpool. PARIS, AFP

Group - B



Argentina



Republic of Korea



Nigeria



Greece

Penalties - Science is on the spot

RICHARD INGHAM

Few moments in football are as extraordinary as the penalty, the moment when a dream can crumble or glory is made - and a player is either cursed as a choker or enters the pantheon of legends.

In the nearly 119 years since the very first penalty kick, in a match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Accrington Stanley, the 11-metre (12-yard) spot has determined more and more tournaments, including the 2006 World Cup final.

As the importance of the penalty has grown, so has research. Scientists see it as a duel between shooter and goalkeeper where biomechanics and psychology can give either side a critical edge.

A mathematical study of penalties at Liverpool's John Moores University puts the death nail into the "blast-it-and-hope" approach.

The perfect penalty, it found, is a ball that is struck high, targeted precisely to the right or left of the goal, and fast, travelling at 25-29 metres per second (90-104 kilometres or 56-65 miles per hour).

Anything faster than this boosts the chance of a miss because of inaccuracy, while anything slower helps the goalie to intercept it.

Moving swiftly to take the penalty (less than three seconds after the whistle is blown) gives the striker the element of surprise, while delaying the strike by more than 13 seconds makes the keeper unsettled, according to the researchers, who looked at decades of international matches involving England.

Waiting for the goalkeeper to move also boosted chances. However, waiting longer than 0.41 milliseconds caused a scoring chance to be halved. A rump of four to six steps was the most successful approach, while a long rump of 10 metres (yards) was the least.

Seen only through the prism of statistics, the balance in penalties is tilted massively in favour of the taker: between two-thirds and three-quarters of strikes result in a goal, according to various analyses in top-flight European club soccer.

But in a counter-intuitive way, these figures also give the psychological advan-

tage to the keeper. If the penalty succeeds, people will pat him on the shoulder and say hard luck, because few expected him to save it. If he does save it, he will be praised to the rafters. In other words, all the onus lies with the penalty-taker.

This problem was explored last year by a team at the University of Exeter in southwest England, which asked members of the university football squad to wear special glasses, recording eye movements, while they took two series of penalties.

In the first series, the players were simply asked to do their best to score. In the second, they were told the results would be recorded and shared with the other players, with a bounty of 50 pounds (£2 dollars, 57 euros) for the best penalty-taker.

The more anxious the penalty-taker was the likelier he was to look at, and focus on, the centrally-positioned goalkeeper. And because gaze control and motor control are tightly coordinated, the player's shot also centralised, making it far easier for the shot to be saved.

"The optimum strategy

for penalty takers to use is to pick a spot and shoot to it, ignoring the goalkeeper in the process," said lead researcher Greg Wood.

Practice is essential, he said. The Hungarian great Ferenc Puskas would train again and again, shooting at a 25-centimetre (one-foot) disc hung 80 centimetres (a yard) from the bar.

"The idea that you cannot recreate the anxiety a penalty-taker feels during a shootout is no excuse for not practising," said Wood. "Do you think other elite performers don't practice basic aiming shots in darts, snooker or golf for the same reasons? The skills need to be ingrained so they are robust under pressure."

As for helping the goalie, experiments suggest looking at a player's hips during the end of the rump gives a tip as to where the ball will be struck. Researchers at the University of Hong Kong also suggest that if a keeper moves just six to 10 centimetres (three to five inches) off centre, that is enough to tempt the taker into directing the kick to the side of the goal where there is more space. PARIS, AFP