

Sports

Silva leads Spain's assault on Costa Rica in friendly

Costa Rica had only one chance of note before break

MALAGA: Manchester City midfielder David Silva played a starring role as an irresistible Spain showed their class to thrash Costa Rica 5-0 in an international friendly on Saturday. Silva struck twice in the second half to further stretch the 2010 World Cup winners' lead after Barcelona's Jordi Alba had fired them into the lead in the sixth minute and Alvaro Morata had doubled their advantage midway through the first half.

Veteran midfielder Andres Iniesta rounded off the drubbing with a distance strike in the 73rd although there was some concern on the Spain bench when Isco proved to be a poor substitute, offering up little opposition to Spain's attacking onslaught. Alba thrashed a Silva cutback beyond Carvajal to get Spain off to the perfect start, while the goalkeeper was at fault for the second goal, spilling a tame cross from Silva at the feet of Morata who gobbled up the rebound from close range. Costa Rica had only one chance of note before the break and Spain showed no mercy after the interval.

Silva pounced on a mix up in the Costa Rica defence to score six minutes into the second period and four minutes later recovered the ball before slamming it low under the grasp of Carvajal to score again. Carvajal made a third costly slip of the game in allowing Iniesta's distance shot through his hands, capping another impressive win for Spain, who will be one of the favourites to lift the World Cup next year. —Reuters

He rested No. 1 goalkeeper David de Gea to hand a debut to Athletic Bilbao's Kepa Arrizabalaga but played

an otherwise familiar side which steamrolled its way through qualifying by winning nine out of 10 games and remaining unbeaten.

A talent-filled midfield four of Silva, Iniesta, Thiago Alcantara and Isco ensured Spain monopolised possession in front of a buoyant, sold out crowd at Malaga's La Rosaleda stadium, barely giving Costa Rica a look in. The Central American side, who reached the quarter-finals of the 2014 World Cup and will also be in Russia next June, were missing Real Madrid goalkeeper Keylor Navas and his understudy Danny Carvajal

proved to be a poor substitute, offering up little opposition to Spain's attacking onslaught. Alba thrashed a Silva cutback beyond Carvajal to get Spain off to the perfect start, while the goalkeeper was at fault for the second goal, spilling a tame cross from Silva at the feet of Morata who gobbled up the rebound from close range. Costa Rica had only one chance of note before the break and Spain showed no mercy after the interval.

Silva pounced on a mix up in the Costa Rica defence to score six minutes into the second period and four minutes later recovered the ball before slamming it low under the grasp of Carvajal to score again. Carvajal made a third costly slip of the game in allowing Iniesta's distance shot through his hands, capping another impressive win for Spain, who will be one of the favourites to lift the World Cup next year. —Reuters

“Every game will be a different world”

Italy's old guard face final stand in WCup play-off

MILAN: Italy's old guard face a final stand in today's World Cup play-off against Sweden in the San Siro after Gian Piero Ventura's side lost the away leg 1-0. Here AFP Sport looks at the three veteran warriors of the 2006 World Cup-winning campaign who face an inglorious exit if Italy fail to qualify for the tournament for the first time in 60 years.

GIANLUIGI BUFFON (Juventus)

The Italy and Juventus captain is targeting a record sixth World Cup appearance in Russia. He made his international debut as a 19-year-old in October 1997 in the snow of another World Cup play-off against Russia, coming on for the injured Gianluigi Pagliuca, and immediately saved heroically from Dmitri Alenichev and ensured Italy qualified for the following year's World Cup. Buffon, whose mother was a discus thrower and father a weightlifter, made his Serie A debut with Parma, winning the Italian Cup, the Italian Super Cup and the UEFA Cup before joining Juventus for 51 million euros in 2001 and going on to become a club legend with

eight Serie A titles with the Turin giants. At age 39, his statistics are staggering. With a remarkable 627 Italian top-flight appearances he will also will earn his 175th cap against Sweden on Monday. That is 39 more than another 2006 World Cup winner, Fabio Cannavaro, and 63 more than the legendary Dino Zoff. "I don't want to think it's the game of life, but I'm convinced that with the help of the public we will do it," he insists.

DANIELE DE ROSSI (Roma)

Defensive midfielder De Rossi is going for a fourth World Cup. The 34-year-old has spent his entire senior career with hometown club Roma which he joined in 2000, rejecting big money moves away. He scored on his international debut in 2004 in a World Cup qualifying match against Norway. He wore Italy's captain's armband for the first time in a 0-0 friendly draw against Iceland in March 2005. De Rossi overtook the recently-retired Andrea Pirlo in the all-time appearances list when he earned his 117th cap in the first leg of the play-off in the Swedish capital, but Buffon's haul is well out of reach. "It would be great to be able to play at my fourth World Cup. It's a tournament that no one wants to miss," said De Rossi. "The stakes are so high that the idea of shedding blood and sweat is appropriate. We must give everything right to the finish."

ANDREA BARZAGLI (Juventus)

Barzagli has won the World Cup, Bundesliga and six Scudettos, but



MILAN: Italy coach Gian Piero Ventura, left, and goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon arrive for a press conference ahead of today's World Cup qualifying play-off. — AP

despite being one of the most decorated defenders of his generation the 36-year-old often goes under the radar. Barzagli started playing midfield but was advised by Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri to switch to defence when the pair played together for Pistoiese in the Italian second division. "I said that if he wanted a different kind of career, he needed to change—he needed to drop back 15 metres," said Allegri. Barzagli

went on to star for Ascoli, Chievo, Palermo and Wolfsburg before joining Juventus in 2011. "Andrea is our professor. He's always in the right place at the right time," says Juventus teammate Giorgio Chiellini. He won his first senior cap in November 2004, in a 1-0 friendly win against Finland under Marcello Lippi. Capped 73 times, it would be his third World Cup after being overlooked by Lippi in 2010. — AFP

Randolph frustrates Denmark

COPENHAGEN: The Republic of Ireland and Denmark played out a drab 0-0 draw in the first leg of their World Cup play-off in Copenhagen on Saturday.

The closest either side came to a goal was when Pione Sisto fired wide in the first half for the hosts, while Yussuf Poulson saw a 90th-minute header saved by Darren Randolph.

Both sides will be satisfied with the result, as Martin O'Neill's Irish now know victory in Dublin on Tuesday would secure a first World Cup appearance since 2002, but an away goal for the Danes could prove decisive after this clean sheet.

"A draw has always got to be seen as a positive result. Although we could have done with scoring an away goal," Ireland midfielder Harry Arter told Sky Sports.

"It (the World Cup) feels a bit closer than it did before the game. If before the campaign, we'd have been offered a one-off game against Denmark to qualify for the World Cup, we'd have bitten off your hands for it." Denmark coach Aage Hareide left striker Nicklas Bendtner on the bench in favour of

Feyenoord's Nicolai Jorgensen.

Irish manager O'Neill made just one change from the team that beat Wales 1-0 to snatch second place in qualifying Group D last month, bringing in Bristol City midfielder Callum O'Dowda to replace the suspended David Meyler. The hosts started strongly and could have taken the lead in the 11th minute when Randolph saved Danish left-back Jens Larsen's volley, before quickly getting back to his feet to hold onto Andreas Cornelius' follow-up effort. Sloppy defending from Ireland skipper Ciaran Clark gave the ball straight to Christian Eriksen and West Ham United keeper Randolph could only palm the midfielder's effort back into the middle, but Sisto fired the rebound wide with the goal gaping.

But the visitors grew into the game as the first half wore on and Cyrus Christie was denied by the onrushing Kasper Schmeichel after bursting into the area with an enterprising run from full-back.

Ireland continued to sit deep and frustrate Denmark, who finished second to Poland in Group E, after the break.

Hareide threw on former Arsenal man Bendtner with less than 20 minutes to go as the home side went in search of a lead to take to Lansdowne Road. The Danes had a late rally, with RB Leipzig forward Poulson drawing a save from Randolph after climbing above the away defence to power a header towards goal, but Ireland held on. — AFP



COPENHAGEN: Denmark's goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel secures the ball under pressure from Ireland's Daryl Murphy, during the World Cup qualifying play-off first leg soccer match between Denmark and the Republic of Ireland at Parken stadium in Copenhagen. — AP



MALAGA: Spain's Iago Aspas, left, and Costa Rica's Ronald Matarrita vie for the ball during the international friendly soccer match between Spain and Costa Rica in Malaga, Spain, Saturday. — AP

Morocco, Tunisia take different paths to World Cup

JOHANNESBURG: North African nations Morocco and Tunisia took contrasting routes Saturday as they qualified for the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Morocco scored twice within five minutes through Nabil Dirar and Medhi Benatia during the opening half to triumph 2-0 in the Ivory Coast and win Group C.

The "Atlas Lions" are going back to the tournament for the first time since 1998 after finishing with 12 points, having not conceded a goal during the six-match group campaign. Ivory Coast, who never looked like recovering from the first-half blows, came second with eight points followed by Gabon with six and Mali with four.

Morocco coach Herve Renard revealed after the match that Moroccan King Mohammed VI had called to congratulate the team. "I thank His Majesty for calling me. It's a huge honour," said the Frenchman.

"He wanted to talk to us to pay tribute to everyone. Tonight we are proud of the Moroccan shirt, proud that the Moroccan flag returns to the World Cup. This is the fifth qualification so Morocco is not a small (football) country."

Tunisia could not break down neighbours Libya in Rades on the outskirts of Tunis and had to settle for a 0-0 draw that was just enough to see them first over the finishing line. With second-place Democratic Republic of Congo netting twice in stoppage time to defeat Guinea 3-1 in Kinshasa, only one point separated the top two.

Unbeaten Tunisia collected 14 points to book a first World Cup appearance since 2006. DR Congo had 13, Libya four and Guinea three. Senegal sealed a place in Russia Friday by winning 2-0 in South Africa and the other two African qualifiers, Nigeria and Egypt, secured slots last month.

Ivory Coast had the first chance at a packed 35,000-seat Stade Felix Houphouet-Boigny but veteran Gervinho blazed over with only the goalkeeper to beat from inside the box. It was to prove a costly miss for the home side, who had to win after beginning the match one point behind a Moroccan team coached by former Ivorian handler, Frenchman Herve Renard.

The first blow came when an intended cross from Dirar went over an Ivorian defender and a Moroccan attacker and slipped past goalkeeper Sylvain Gbohouo into the far corner. Rattled Ivory Coast fell further behind as they failed to cut off a corner and Juventus defender Benatia struck a first-time shot into the net.

Belgian coach Marc Wilmots tried to revive the lacklustre Ivorians by introducing Ghislain Konan at half-time and Maxwell Cornet and veteran Salomon Kalou during the second half.

But Morocco comfortably contained the hosts in a match that threatened to boil over at times with Dirar and Crystal Palace flyer Wilfried Zaha wrestling each other to the ground. Tunisia dominated possession at the Stade Olympique, but unpredictable Libya defended resolutely, creating an increasingly tense atmosphere.

Had Tunisia lost, they would have ceded top place to DR Congo, who finished strongly to overcome Guinea 3-1 at the Stade des Martyrs. Guinean Ousmane Sidibe conceded an own-goal after 61 minutes and Keita Junior levelled just three minutes after coming off the bench. Jonathan Boling put the Congolese Lions ahead again two minutes into additional time and Neeskens Kebano added a third goal almost immediately. — AFP