

Road to South Africa 2010

Julian Sachs (June 11, 2010)



On Monday the Italian representation begins its African adventure while Italians all over the world are preparing for a month of excitement. But is Italy ready to face these high expectations and have the right choices been made?

Here we go again. Four years have passed since Italy was crowned World Champions in Berlin after defeating Germany and France, proving wrong win after win the millions of Italians who felt the team had no chances, the players were too old, and that manager Marcello Lippi's selections for the squad were inadequate.

Four years later the situation is exactly the same: the Italian representation has reached South Africa while back home the 60.000.000 Italian "coaches" are complaining about the team having no chances, the age of the players, and that manager Lippi selected the wrong players, mostly criticizing the exclusion of 28-year-old super-star Antonio Cassano, who lead Sampdoria to fourth place and a chance to participate in next year's UEFA Champions League, but whose eclectic character and hot temper never seem to fit the expectations of the Tuscan coach.

Italians aren't the only ones disappointed by Lippi's selections: Italian-Americans felt that this would be the cup of New Jersey-born forward Giuseppe Rossi, whose presence in the team was almost



certain until quite recently. But 27-year-old Fabio Quagliarella, a forward for Napoli, was chosen instead, immediately proving himself during last week's friendly against Switzerland by scoring the tying goal which set the score to its final 1-1, the same result of the 1982 and 2006 pre-World Cup friendlies against the neighboring Confederation. On both of those occasions, Italy ended up winning the Cup.

But Lippi - who will leave the national team for the second time after the World Cup is over, leaving it in the hands of former Fiorentina coach Cesare Prandelli - isn't one to rely upon superstition to lead his team in this first World Cup on African soil. He has a very difficult task at hand: to manufacture a recognizably "Italian" style of play which emphasizes the players' natural traits. Italian soccer has gradually moved away from this ideal since the Bosman ruling of 1995, which eliminated the quota of three foreign players per European team.

This year was an important one for Italian soccer: in the midst of a proposal to reduce the number of Italian teams allowed in the Champions League because of a decrease in prestige, the Milanese team Inter won the competition for the first time in 45 years. Inter also won the Italian Serie A and the Italian Cup, basically everything that came its way.

But was it really a victory for Italian soccer? Not counting the extra goalies, the squad only included three Italian players, two of which were barely seen during the entire season and one, young striker Mario Balotelli, seemed to create more havoc away from the field than anything inside it, fueling a great deal of talk around his private and public life almost rivaling the above-mentioned Cassano. The rest of the team was made up of four Brazilians, four Argentinians, together with representatives of Colombia, Serbia, Montenegro, Portugal, Cameroon, and the Netherlands (the list goes on).

But Inter's strong point, its "winning hand", was surely its 47-year-old Portuguese coach José Mourinho. This was not an Italian team, but more a kind of World All-Star selection.

Italian teams have always played a tactical and defensive soccer, because Italians tend to be not very tall and not athletic at olympic levels, but soccer is an important part of their lives from childhood to old age. It surrounds them at all times. It's more important than politics. It IS politics. It's a language they speak fluently and no rule or tactic is mysterious to them. Thus Italy's strong points have always been a tight defense, an attentive goal keeper, and quick counterattacks, all summarized in the term "catenaccio" (literally a 'bolt'). But this has been lost within the Italian Serie A.

Team effort has given way to amazing soloists; physically huge players have been imported from South America and Africa; rapidity and persistence have substituted patience and opportunism.

But Lippi doesn't have the players to represent the new Italian style, he has actual Italians. His goal will be guarded, once again, by 32-year-old Gianluigi Buffon, with the additional help of captain and central-back Fabio Cannavaro (at 37 the oldest on the team), just as in 2006. More than any other player, these two were responsible for that victory, and were respectively awarded second and first prize in the subsequent Ballon d'Or. They were at the peak of their careers. Four years later they are the shadows of what they were back then, especially the Neapolitan defender, who just a few days ago announced his divorce with Juventus and his transfer to Al-Ahli Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

Cannavaro's partner at the center of the defense is Giorgio Chiellini, by far the strongest Italian defender considering Alessandro Nesta's absence. Chiellini is 26 years old and also a player of Juventus, the club that made Lippi who he is today. But it's not such a good idea for Italy to rely upon this year's "bolt" as much as it did in Germany, considering Juventus' disastrous season with only 55

points and a disappointing seventh place which barely allowed it to qualify for the Third qualifying round of the UEFA Europa League.

The midfield, once again, relies upon its talented beacon Andrea Pirlo (31) and Roma star Daniele De Rossi (27). Unfortunately Pirlo will miss the first two or three games because of an injury and will probably be replaced by Fiorentina fantasy-man Riccardo Montolivo (25). But the center of the field will surely witness many changes from game to game, thanks to the many possibilities available to the coach, namely Gennaro Gattuso (32), Angelo Palombo (29), and Juventus discovery Claudio Marchisio (24).

The wings will be covered by veterans such as Gianluca Zambrotta (33) and Mauro German Camoranesi (34), but also by players who are relatively new to the Italian squad such as Napoli's Christian Maggio (28) and Genoa's Domenico Criscito (24).

The attack was certainly where Lippi had the most doubts. The media had a really tough time trying to guess who would be the six forwards chosen by the coach from Viareggio. During the last few months the list of about fifteen names grew gradually smaller until Lippi announced the eight he would decide from.

Apart from the above-mentioned Giuseppe Rossi, the axe landed upon Milan striker Marco Borriello. The six players that were chosen in the end include two pure strikers, Fiorentina's Alberto Gilardino (28) and Sampdoria's Giampaolo Pazzini (26), second striker Quagliarella and wingers Simone Pepe (27) and Antonio Di Natale (33), who used to form the whole attack of club Udinese. The sixth key player is Juventus forward Vincenzo Iaquinta (31), who can play in any attacking role.

Italy's attack was not its strong point in 2006 and Lippi has left home many famous names like Francesco Totti, Alessandro Del Piero, Filippo Inzaghi, and Luca Toni, mainly betting on this season's top-goalscorer Di Natale in support of Fiorentina striker Gilardino. It is very hard to predict if these are good choices, but what is certain is that they left many people unhappy back home in the "boot".

But thousands of kilometers away, in the Rainbow Nation, the team is preparing for the three games in Group F of the tournament. Italy's debut will be against Paraguay, arguably the strongest of the other three teams of the group on June 14, at 2:30pm Eastern Time. During the last three World Cups Paraguay managed to pass the group stage twice and this year they qualified from the CONMEBOL South American group 5 points ahead of Maradona's Argentina.

Unfortunately for them their top-goalscorer Salvador Cabañas was shot in the head in a bar in Mexico City in January and might never play again. But Italy will still have to look out for the skills of Santa Cruz and Haedo Valdez, respectively forwards for Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund. Centerfield Edgar Barreto plays in Bergamo for Atalanta and might have some tricks up his sleeves against his colleagues.

Italy's second game will be against New Zealand on June 20, at 10:00am Eastern Time. The Kiwis have never left a mark in the history of the World Cup and shouldn't be too difficult to handle by the "azzurri". After arriving first in their qualification group they made it to the world cup by beating Bahrain in the AFC-OFC play-off.

The third and final group stage game will take place on June 24, at 10:00am Eastern Time against Slovakia, the team headed by 23-year-old Napoli star Marek Hamsik, by far their most talented player. This team is not to be underestimated since they won their qualification group two points ahead of Slovenia, eliminating their rivals Czech Republic as well as Northern Ireland and Poland, scoring 22 goals (Italy only scored 18).



The top two teams of Italy's Group F will meet the top two teams of Group E in the Round of 16, which means the two strongest among Denmark, Cameroon, Japan and - the team to watch out for - the Netherlands.

So here we go again. After four years of preparations, bets and debates, the general buzz quiets down as conductor Marcello Lippi stands up on the podium and fine tunes his orchestra: but it's only the calm before the storm.

ITALY'S GROUP STAGE SCHEDULE

06/14 2:00pm - (Green Point) Italy-Paraguay

06/20 10:00am - (Mbombela) Italy-New Zealand

06/24 10:00am - (Ellis Park) Slovakia-Italy

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