

World Cup's '33rd team' eager for action

Gravenbruch (Germany), June 7 (DPA) There is a 33rd team taking part in the 2006 World Cup. It is international, talented and well trained. And just like Brazil, France or Japan, this team is eager to get into action and prove its worth in Germany.

FIFA says its line-up of 78 match officials, including 21 referees and five reserves, is 'the best it has ever had'. They have come from as far away places as Australia and Benin, after overcoming a tough and lengthy selection process.

And despite years of experience spent officiating top-level football matches, their excitement is noticeable as they meet journalists visiting their headquarters in a luxury hotel in Gravenbruch, near Frankfurt.

Horacio Elizondo is a 42-year-old veteran from Argentina. But he looks like a kid who has just found a hidden jar of cookies as he talks about taking part in the opening match of the tournament, Friday's Group A clash between hosts Germany and Costa Rica.

'This is going to be the most important match of my life,' says Elizondo, who otherwise works as a physical education teacher in Parada Robles.

For others, like Roberto Rosetti of Italy, being in Germany is a matter of national and professional pride.

'I am very excited about being here as a representative of all of Italy's 32,000 referees,' he says.

Rosetti, whose other occupation is in hospital management, and his two Italian assistants - one of which spends his working life selling organic fruit near Lake Garda, received a last-minute call-up after match officials from Greece and Spain were forced to defect due to injury.

His appointment is particularly important for a country like Italy, which is still reeling from a major match-fixing scandal that has brought shame on many of his colleagues.

As Rosetti speaks, FIFA's original choice of referee, Massimo De Santis, is busy trying to defend himself from accusations that he furthered his career by unfairly favouring Serie A giants Juventus.

Two Italian journalists ask Rosetti whether the scandal unfolding back home could affect his performance in Germany.

'I am fully concentrated on this tournament,' he cuts them short.

Of the referees present in Gravenbruch, only eight have had any World Cup experience.

One of them is Germany's Markus Merk. The Otterbach dentist, along with Graham Poll of England, is heavily tipped to officiate the July 9 final in Berlin, should their respective countries not make it that far.

Asked whether he would prefer to see Germany or himself in the final, he offers a typically Teutonic

answer: 'The time for dreams is over. I am just here to work hard.'

Unlike four years ago, referees will be assisted by two linesmen from their own federation in all of the matches they are called to officiate.

The novelty was one of several introduced by FIFA in a bid to improve on the at times poor level of refereeing seen in Japan and South Korea.

Rosetti believes the so-called 'trio system' is a good idea as it is bound to improve mutual understanding.

'We know each other well and we are getting to know each other even better. This means all we need is a quick look and a gesture to agree on a decision,' Rosetti says, his assistants Alessandro Stagnoli and Cristiano Copelli nodding in agreement beside him.

Should non-verbal communication fail, technology comes to the rescue.

For the first time in the tournament's history, match officials will be able to talk to each other during the game via a microphone and headset.

Carlos Simon of Brazil, a 41-year-old journalist, believes this could prove particularly useful in preventing skirmishes between players.

'For example, one of my assistants could warn me that two players are getting at each other and that the situation is about to degenerate,' Simon says.

FIFA is particularly eager to ensure dangerous tackles, diving, time wasting and any other form of unsporting behaviour do not spoil 'the beautiful game'.

The referees seem perfectly aware of the FIFA directive, particularly as they have been warned they will be sent home early unless they enforce the rules.

'Any player found guilty of violent play or unsporting behaviour will be severely punished,' says Benito Archundia of Mexico, a lawyer and economist who will be in charge of the June 13 Group F clash between defending champions Brazil and Croatia.

England's Poll, the only professional referee in the tournament, is also warning players they will be booked if they are caught wearing jewellery on the pitch.

Polls says FIFA could even decide to cut particularly tight wedding rings that refuse to come off in order to enforce this rule.

Some fear FIFA's strict guidelines could lead to a flurry of red and yellow cards - there were a record 17 sending off and 272 bookings at the 2002 World Cup.

'Let's hope red and yellow don't become the colours of this World Cup,' says Jorge Larrionda, a clerk from Uruguay.

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