

## Queiroz struggling to repeat Portugal's glory years

Portugal's qualification for the World Cup finals has been greeted with more relief than euphoria in Lisbon, which is a sign that expectations have lowered in this football-crazy country.

Carlos Queiroz's team booked their ticket for South Africa with a play-off victory over Bosnia-Herzegovina, a result that was greeted with satisfaction and relief rather than delight in Portugal, and there was little flag-waving and celebration in the streets.

Portugal went into the play-offs after finishing second behind Denmark in European qualifying Group 1, just one slender point above third-placed Sweden.

'We always had the conviction,' said Queiroz after the 'Battle of Zenica', 'that we were on the right road...It has been a long journey, with various slip-ups, but we were always convinced that we would make it.'

During the glory years of Luiz Felipe Scolari (2002-2008), Portugal were runners-up to Greece at Euro 2004 (a home tournament that they should really have won) and semi-finalists at the World Cup two years later. In addition, they never had any problems in qualifying for the big tournaments, unlike Queiroz's outfit.

However, those Scolari years seem distant now. Indeed, many of the key players of that period (Couto, Maniche, Costinha, Rui Costa, Luis Figo and Resende) have hung up their national team boots. Queiroz is trying to replace them with younger players, but it has been a very hit-and-miss process.

Queiroz has seemed indecisive about his choice of goalkeeper, switching constantly between veterans Ricardo and Hilario and youngsters Eduardo and Rui Patricio, with none of them looking particularly convincing.

Braga goalkeeper Eduardo will probably be first-choice in South Africa, but he looked shaky in the first leg against Bosnia and three times had to be rescued by the woodwork.

Despite the doubts concerning the goalkeeper, the Portuguese defence looks fairly solid nowadays. Paulo Ferreira and Miguel are experienced right-backs, whilst the muscular Jose Bosingwa is another option down the right. Queiroz is lucky to have four high-quality centre-backs in Ricardo Carvalho, Bruno Alves, Fernando Miera and Pepe.

However, the left-back slot could be a problem. Neither Rolando nor Vitorino Antunes have impressed, and Queiroz might be forced to put either Ferreira or Bosingwa on the left.

Two powerful young midfielders - Raul Meireles and Joao Moutinho - have emerged since 2008. Meireles scored the crucial goal against Bosnia in Zenica. Tiago and Miguel Veloso are both reliable, but neither are visionary playmakers who can boss the midfield as Rui Costa used to. Veteran Deco is not in good physical shape and may not even be first-choice at Chelsea between now and May.

Duda provides class and imagination out on the left, but nonetheless it is more a midfield of muscle

and power rather than of craft and vision.

At least Portugal will be strong down the flanks in South Africa. Queiroz has four quality wingers at his disposal: Cristiano Ronaldo, Nani and Simao, plus the volatile Ricardo Quaresma, who is out of form and favour at the moment.

However, reliable strikers are few and far between - this has traditionally been a Portuguese problem - and a lot depends on Sporting Lisbon veteran Liedson.

The same as Pepe and Deco, Liedson, 31, is another Brazilian player who has opted for Portugal, after many years playing in the Superliga.

Hugo Almeida and Edinho, neither of whom have convinced in the dark red shirt, will probably be on the bench in South Africa. Queiroz will almost certainly stick by the 4-5-1 formation that gave Scolari such good results, with Liedson battlin away on his own up front, but with Ronaldo and Simao cutting in fiercely from the wings.

The Coach:

Carlos Queiroz, 56, will go to South Africa with valuable local knowledge, having been the Bafana Bafana coach from 2000 to 2002 (he guided them to the 2002 World Cup finals but was controversially sacked beforehand). He is vastly experienced, having coached in many different countries and leagues.

But his first spell in charge of Portugal (1991-1993) was not a success, and he does not enjoy the same popularity and respect as the much-missed Scolari. The problems encountered on the road to South Africa, and his inconsistency regard team selection and tactics, have not helped to improve his reputation and image in the eyes of the Portugal fans.

The Star:

Cristiano Ronaldo will be 25 by the time of the finals and has all of the attributes needed to be the personality of the tournament: charisma, star quality, pace, power, vision, imagination - and an uncanny eye for goal. He was the revelation of Euro 2004, and one of the stars of the 2006 World Cup, though by Euro 2008 his dodgy right ankle was beginning to trouble him.

That ankle was operated upon in July 2008 but was badly sprained in September playing for Real Madrid against Olympique Marseille. He missed the play-off against Bosnia. Queiroz and the whole of Portugal are praying that he avoids further ankle trouble before June.

Factfile:

Nickname: Seleccao das Quinas

Founded: 1914

FIFA affiliation: 1923

Highest FIFA ranking: 4 - March 2001

Lowest FIFA ranking: 43 - August 1998

Previous World Cup appearances: 4 (1966, 1986, 2002, 2006)

Best World Cup performance: Third (1966)

Date qualified for finals: Nov 18, 2009

( © IANS / India eNews)