

Cup about to get even hotter

Extra time and continental rivalry will up the ante

THE knockout stages of the World Cup bring new challenges for players and coaches. Tactical decision-making becomes increasingly significant as the stakes rise. Fitness and the ability to keep the best possible starting XI on the field become differentiators between success and failure. Add the prospect of 30 minutes of additional playing time in hot and humid conditions, plus the mental burden of imminent penalties, and the Brazil tournament, so entertaining to date, is about to assume a much more suspenseful cloak.

All these challenges were demonstrated by Brazil and Chile in a furiously fast-paced match that culminated in every supporter's worst nightmare, the penalty shoot-out. Much to the relief of the hosts (and, I would suggest, the neutral world, for the benefit of the tournament), Brazil scraped through and move on to a clash with an enterprising Colombia.

It has been a South American affair. Of the 10 teams from the Americas (South America and the Concacaf region), eight reached the knockout stages. Compare that with Europe, with only six out of 13. The way the draw has worked out will ultimately skew this balance, because the South American teams are set to eliminate each other — two are out already by their own continent's feet, and Brazil vs Colombia will further reduce four into one by the semifinals.

Many have attributed this dominance to the so-called continental home-ground advantage. That is, no European team has ever won a World Cup in South America, and the only South American team to win in Europe

DOCTOR KNOW

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Penalties are bound to decide a few more matches

was Brazil in 1958. I've written about home-ground advantage before, and explained that much of it exists because referees are sub-consciously influenced by the cheers and appeals of thousands in the crowd, and thus make decisions that benefit teams with the loudest support. Other typical explanations are the cultural and language familiarity of being closer to home.

A bigger factor, in my opinion, is that some European teams have underperformed, mostly because they have relied more heavily on ageing players whose significance to club teams has left them fatigued and with nagging injuries (I'm thinking mainly of Spain, Italy and Portugal). Fewer South American players are as heavily relied on in Europe. This phenomenon has been observed before, including in 2002, when European nations underperformed to such an extent that Uefa changed its calendar to reduce the number of matches in the Champions League.

Another factor at this World Cup is the heat. Many commentators have suggested that the South American players are better able to handle the hot and humid conditions. The only problem with that theory is that most of the South Americans play in Europe anyway — 16 of Colombia's and 19 of Brazil's 23-man squads are Europe-based, for example. Physiologically, we lose our adaptation to the heat within a few weeks, and so all those players, coming off a European winter, are no better off than their European rivals.

So far, the heat hasn't obviously affected matches, at least not dramatically, as it has in other events such as tennis's Australian Open earlier this year. The problem for footballers is not really safety, however, but performance. Considering that the average player runs about 10km and makes about 100 sprints during a match, what you'll see in the heat is a progressive slowing down of the game. Now, with extra time a possibility, teams will lack even more than before the physiological ability to go forward with real intent. I'd predict that not many goals will be scored in extra time at this World Cup because that fatigue will cause teams to revert to more conservative tactics and push forward less, and most extra-time games will be shut down. After all, who wants to make the mistake of costing their team with a glaring error?

Whatever happens, the suspense is about to be ratcheted up, and penalties are bound to decide a few more matches. They are an entirely separate proposition, for discussion next time. Until then, enjoy the drama.

'Big Four' set for titanic battles

WIMBLEDON will showcase all the big four of the men's game in the second week, for the first time in three years after Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer and Andy Murray reached the last 16.

It was in 2011 that the undisputed superpowers last all made it to the business end of the tournament and chances are that they will extend their domination of the season's third Grand Slam event.

Lleyton Hewitt was the last man other than them to lift the trophy back in 2002. Since then, Federer has won seven and Nadal two, with Djokovic and Murray taking one apiece.

Today, they are in fourth-round action, with top seed Djokovic, the 2011 champion and runner-up to Murray in 2013, taking on flamboyant Frenchman Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, a semifinalist in 2011 and 2012.

Djokovic has a 12-5 winning record over Tsonga, including the 2011 last four at Wimbledon as well as the quarterfinals of the 2012 Olympics also played at the All England Club.

Tsonga's last win over the Serb was four years ago in Australia.

Nadal, the world No 1 and champion in 2008 and 2010, has already overcome a psychological barrier by making the second week for the first time since 2011.

He has dropped the first set in all three rounds so far and tackles 19-year-old Australian wild card Nick Kyrgios, the world No 144, for a



AMBITIOUS: Serbia's Novak Djokovic, the No 1 seed, will be hoping to improve on his runner-up finish at Wimbledon last year
Picture: AFP

place in the quarterfinals.

Federer, who won the last of his seven Wimbledon titles in 2012, tackles Spanish veteran Tommy Robredo, who has made the fourth round for the first time at the 13th attempt.

Federer has won 10 of his 11 meetings against him. However, Robredo triumphed when they last met at the US Open fourth round last year, in what was Federer's earliest exit in New York for a decade.

Murray has reached the last 16 for the seventh year in succession and has dropped just 19 games in three rounds, comfortably a personal best

in his tournament history. The third-seeded Murray plays Kevin Anderson, the first South African to make the fourth round for 14 years.

"He's a big guy with a big game," said Murray, who has a 1-1 record against Anderson. "He's played some very good tennis this year. Probably been his best year on the tour so far in terms of consistency. It will be tough."

Murray won in straight sets in the first round of the 2010 Australian Open before Anderson hit back with a win at the 2011 Montreal Masters. — AFP