



GUINEA-BISSAU AFCON 2017 : UNDERDOGS ENTER THE LIONS DEN

The 2017 edition of the Africa Cup of Nations will feature Guinea-Bissau making their debut in, what looks set to be a thrilling edition with many of the perennial big hitters including Cameroon, Ghana, Egypt, Morocco and Ivory Coast challenging for the title. It is something of a fairy-tale for the small West African country, who will be making their debut in the tournament, having first attempted to qualify for the 1994 edition. They secured their path to the tournament in the penultimate game of qualification in a thrilling 3-2 over former champions Zambia.

Despite the government dropping out from funding a pre-tournament training camp, along with last minute pay disputes and potential player strikes, a last minute player meeting with president Jose Mario Vaz has seen all outstanding bonuses up to €23,000 per player being paid. Despite the upheaval, the team is looking set to cause more shocks in the tournament proper.

This success has been built on team manager Paulo Torres looking to the former colonial base of Portugal to boost squad numbers with those based in Europe of Guinean extraction. There is a hope that the experience that these players have from playing at club level along with the likes of those in the victorious Portugal Euro 2016 squad will be of great benefit to the squad, as explained by team co-ordinator Caito Balde who is set to take charge of the side as Paulo Torres serves a four game ban for dissent against a referee during qualifying.

"Portugal are an inspiration to us...Many of the players in the Guinea Bissau team have played with many of those players who have now become champions of Europe. They have passed through the best training school that is Portugal and will look to show that at the Nations Cup"

Playing internationally since 1952, it has been a long footballing journey for small Guinea-Bissau. Their football association was officially founded in 1974, but had to wait until 1986 to be recognized by CAF and FIFA. Since making their competitive debut in Cup of Nations Qualifying in 1994, competitive matches have been a largely fruitless exercise for Guinea-Bissau with only four wins in qualification in their history. Upon the draw being made for qualifying for the 2017 edition, their form looked set to continue, being drawn to the same qualification group with former winners Zambia and Congo along with Victor Wanyama's Kenya. A total of one point with four goals conceded from the first two groups games seemed to fit this pattern. However in March, two meetings with Kenya within a week

changed the completion of the group with Camara scoring in the home tie in a 1-0 win, quickly followed up four days later with Cicero scoring after 81 minutes in Kinshasa to put Guinea Bissau in uncharted territory. The game had to be halted for some 30 minutes as a home crowd frustrated by Kenyan coach and team selections had threatened to boycott the game, with tensions spilling over in to battles with stadium police. However the West African side were able to see the game out, with qualification turning from dreams to reality. As goalkeeper Jonas Mendes told CAFOnline after the match.

"We now believe that we actually can (go all the way to AFCON). It is not easy but beating Kenya, a very tough team home and away gives us some sense of belief. We will now focus on the two remaining matches and give it the best we can,"

This set up a dramatic fixture in June knowing a win at home to 2012 champions Zambia could see them through. In an enthralling encounter, Guinea-Bissau twice took the lead only to be twice pegged back by Zambia. Though as the game entered added time, the Guinea-Bissau players were not looking to settle for the draw, as described by Bocundji Ca.

"Even against Zambia, we went in with the same determination as we had against Kenya," Ca said. "We did not even consider drawing, we only wanted to win, by any means. It was the first opportunity in our history to qualify for AFCON, so we knew we could not miss it."

In a seminal moment for football in Guinea-Bissau Toni Silva came up with a late, late winner to send the Guinea Bissau faithful into dream land. As Ca continued,

"The result meant more than football to the country"

Drawn to a group featuring the hosts Gabon, 2013 finalists Burkina Faso and African heavyweights and four time winners Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau will have their work cut out to produce further heroics. However, the side will be hopeful based on the progress in qualifying and will be sure to have the full support of the nation behind them as their footballing odyssey continues.

Guinea Bissau Squad AFCON Squad

Goalkeepers: Rui Dabo (Cova da Piedade), Papa Masse Mbaye Fall (Orellana Costa Dulce), Jonas Mendes (Salgueiros)

Defenders: Mamadu Cande (Tondela), Tomas dabo (Arouca), Eridson (Freamunde), Emmanuel Mendy, Rudinilson Silva (both unattached), Agostinho Soares (Sporting Covilha), Juary Soares (Mafra)

Midfielders: Bocundji Ca (unattached), Idrissa Camara (Avellino), Francisco Junior (Stromsgodset), Nani (Felgueiras), Piqueti (Sporting Braga), Sana (Academica Viseu), Toni Silva, Zezinho (both Levadiakos)

Strikers: Aldair (Olhanense), Abel Camara (Belenenses), João Mario (Chaves), Fredric Mendy (Ulsan Hyundai), Sami (Akhisar Belediyespor)