



Preparing to party Ghana supporters are hoping for a celebration with their heroes.

Black Stars out to shine again

Ghana's 2014 World Cup campaign was more notable for the headlines made off the pitch rather than what the side actually did with the ball. New coach Avram Grant has been charged with making the Black Stars successful again, and the Israeli's first opportunity to do just that is already upon him, at the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations.

Elio Stamm, Accra

Ghanaians are football-crazy. If a European Champions League or an English Premier League game is being shown, scores of people will often congregate on the streets to watch, even holding up the traffic. The most important matches in this West African country involve the national team, but in the past 12 months the Black Stars, so-called in reference to the country's flag, have severely tested the affection they normally receive from their countrymen.

Despite an encouraging 2-2 draw with eventual champions Germany, Ghana departed the World Cup in Brazil at the group stage after finishing bottom of their pool with two points. It was the team's actions off the field that prompted such dissatisfaction among the supporters, however. Sulley Muntari and Kevin-Prince Boateng, two of the side's star names, were suspended from the squad and sent home after two games for quarrelling with the staff, and the remaining players were reluctant to even play the final match without immediate payment of their bonuses.

“I'm only happy if we win matches.”

Avram Grant

A team for 2017

After the tournament, the Ghanaian Football Association meted out the consequences. Coach Kwesi Appiah had to resign and under his temporary replacement Maxwell Konadu, a young squad, without Muntari and Boateng, embarked on qualification for the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations. Despite one or two poor results, Ghana managed to qualify as group winners for the tournament in Equatorial Guinea. It was then that the federation began searching for suitable candidates to stabilise the team over a sustained period of time, and the decision was taken to hire Grant, formerly coach of Chelsea and West Ham United. What had partly worked in the Israeli's favour was that he had “shown in England he could handle players' egos,” explained association president Kwesi Nyantakyi. The 59-year-old was presented in his new role before a hundred Ghanaian journalists, where both he and his colleagues sought to dampen expectations of immediate



The new boss Avram Grant (standing) took the Black Stars helm at the end of last year.



Pre-match training Grant's rejuvenated team at Mongomo Stadium last Sunday.



No longer on board Essien, Boateng and Muntari.

success. According to Nyantakyi, the goal was not to become champions of Africa in 2015 but rather to give Grant time to build a team capable of competing at the event in 2017 and finally winning a fifth continental title, their first since 1982. Grant's contract in charge of the senior side runs until the completion of the 2017 tournament, and during that time he will also, as technical director, be improving youth football by training the coaches of the junior national teams.

Bonus issue cleared up

After taking over, Grant had six weeks to prepare his players for what awaits them in Equatorial Guinea. They have been drawn in what is on paper the toughest group of the tournament alongside Algeria, South Africa and Senegal, but Grant is nevertheless keen to taste some success in his first tournament at the Black Stars' helm. "Like the Ghanaian fans, I'm only happy when we win matches," said the man who took Chelsea to the 2008 Champions League final.

Grant has placed his faith in young talent and opted against picking players in their thirties - as many as 12 internationals who competed at the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations in South Africa are not among the current crop. Neither Muntari nor Boateng have been recalled, while Michael Essien of AC Milan has been overlooked and Kwadwo Asamoah of Juventus misses out with injury. In their absence, experienced captain Asamoah Gyan and brothers André and Jordan Ayew will provide the inspiration.

The issue of bonuses was also dealt with in a precautionary manner before the tournament began, with skipper Gyan declaring that the players' only focus was on football to banish the memories of Brazil as quickly as possible. The best way to do that is by winning games, although a 2-1 defeat to Senegal in their opening match was not the ideal start. The path to being accepted once again in the hearts and minds of the Ghanaian people remains a long one. ❁



Libreville, Gabon, 1972 Captains Boujemaa Benkhrijf (Morocco) and Jacques Ndolou (People's Republic of the Congo) prepare for kick-off.

“A festival of football”

The 30th Africa Cup of Nations began a week ago, and Equatorial Guinea captain Juvenal Edjogo-Owono is reluctant to pick his favourites for the title. “It’s difficult to say; African football is unpredictable.”