

MACBETH READY TO PLAY HIS PART

SOUTH AFRICA

Midfielder says Bafana Bafana coach's training regime and playing style will pay dividends once the action gets under way, reports **Phil Gordon**

JUST like Nelson Mandela, the law is something that is close to MacBeth Sibaya's heart. The South Africa midfielder might have followed in the family business if it had not been for the distraction of football, but over the next few weeks there will not be a lawyer in the land who does envy MacBeth.

The Rainbow Nation is in the grip of World Cup fever. Even Mandela, at the age of 92, wanted his picture taken with the boys of Bafana Bafana. It is not certain if Mandela will attend the opening game of the tournament on

an awesome man. You feel humble. For me, it is maybe more important. My father is a lawyer and my uncle a judge. They were both able to practise law once South Africa became a free country. That could not happen under the apartheid regime. Mandela studied law when he was younger."

Sibaya's father did not confine his thirst for knowledge simply to legal tomes. His love of Shakespeare was what gave MacBeth his unusual name but the boy from Durban preferred more active pursuits. The tigerish midfielder has spent eight years away from home, earning a living in the cold, harsh surroundings of Norway and Russia, but now he is back Sibaya can feel a country warming to his team.

Rarely has a host nation ever begun a World Cup campaign with such low expectations. South Africa's slide down the Fifa rankings over the last four years have them installed at short odds with bookmakers around the globe to become the first hosts not to reach the knockout phase.

Not even the brief injection of hope supplied by the Confederations Cup last summer, which South Africa staged as a dry run for the 2010 World Cup finals and surprisingly reached the semi-finals, could halt the slide. The coach, Joel Santana, was sacked and Parreira – who had been in charge for 18 months before quitting in 2008 – returned to whip Bafana Bafana into shape.

The veteran Brazilian, who led his own country to their 1994 World Cup success, has imposed a ruthless regime in a series of training camps in the last six months, all designed to hoist South Africa's fitness. He also introduced a new sense of diligence into the playing style, saying: "We have to be organised and it is vital that we do not give the ball away, as I see in the local league."

Double training sessions have been the order of the day since Sibaya hooked up with his national team colleagues after returning home from club duty with Russian champions Rubin Kazan.

"It is intense," acknowledged MacBeth. "Some of the guys have lost a few kilos in weight, but we all feel really fit and it will be worth it. We need stamina if



MacBeth Sibaya, right, and Steven Pienaar warm up in the late evening sun during a training session at The Rand Stadium in Johannesburg

Photograph: Getty

we are going to use our pressing game, which is something I have learned at Rubin."

The boot camp is at odds with the South African philosophy of football. Fans love to see tricks, but for coaches those sorts of adornments are unwanted baggage at this level of the game where opponents ruthlessly punish weakness. Perhaps, that is why Parreira jettisoned Benni McCarthy.

The West Ham United striker may be the most experienced player available to South Africa but his hedonistic lifestyle seems to have caught up with him. McCarthy was not included in the final 23-man squad announced by Parreira last Tuesday, deemed to be so overweight that not even intense fitness sessions could get him into

shape. Sibaya, along with Everton's Steven Pienaar and Aaron Mokoena of Portsmouth, are the most experienced of those who remain and Sibaya admits that element will be crucial against Mexico, once the hype and distraction of the opening ceremony evaporates. "We feel we can win against Mexico but we have to keep the ball far better than we have done in the past," he said.

"Mexico are a very good side. They defeated Italy, the world champions, in a friendly here on Thursday night. We won our last game 5-0 against Guatemala last Monday and we have one more build-up game against Denmark (a 1-0 victory yesterday) to get things right. As a team, we cannot wait.

"There is a lot of pressure. The fans have been at all of our training sessions

and we know that people want us to do well for the reputation of South Africa.

"We cannot let them down. We showed last year in the Confederations Cup that we can lift our game against the top teams, like Brazil and Spain, and play with that burden of responsibility as hosts."

The ultimate prize, though, may be just too much of a fairytale. South Africa may have won rugby's World Cup when it was staged there in 1995,

with Mandela, the first black president, symbolising the new nation by wearing a Springbok jersey that once been the preserve of whites. But football is a far fiercer international arena.

Sport in modern South Africa remains starkly divided. The white minority, about 10% of the population,

still prefers rugby and cricket. In 2007, South Africa's world champion rugby team counted 13 whites, two mixed-raced players, and no blacks.

When whites watch football, they usually follow European clubs. Local football fans are overwhelmingly black, a legacy of apartheid when stadiums provided a rare public gathering place. However, a fusion of races is expected at the World Cup venues.

The dreadlocked Sibaya will provide a tenacious defence of Bafana Bafana's ambitions in the midfield duels, just as he has done off the pitch as one of the team representatives who have been negotiating with the South Africa Football Association over bonuses for players. The legal DNA has clearly been passed on from father to son.

Blatter only playing at happy families

FIFA

Unrest lies behind smoothed-over facade presented by president ahead of Congress, says **Andrew Jennings**

THE FIFA family is united and happy' announces Sepp Blatter, presenting the agenda for this week's Congress in Johannesburg. Oh really?

United? Let's hope Herr Blatter takes time to explain why, in the last six months, he has fired his director of communications, Hans Klaus, and then his trusted aide and counsellor, Jerome Champagne. Perhaps the Fifa president will reveal who squeezed him to unload Champagne, his top strategist for a dozen years. And how much did the pay-offs and gagging clauses cost Fifa?

Unhappiness: There's discontent in the ranks about the embarrassingly chaotic organisation of World Cup ticket sales. Not being able to fill the seats in an orderly manner for the world's greatest sporting event is reason enough to sack him and his 23-man executive.

More unhappiness: The glut on the ticket market will have angered officials in those national associations who expect to make a nice tax-free earner selling their quota to the black market operators. Not this year. It's hard to give them away. What can be done?

Herr Blatter has the answer! "Due to a strong financial result," he promises, "Fifa will announce an extraordinary financial contribution to its members as well as to the confederations."

This sounds like more light-touch auditing of even bigger grants than the current annual \$250,000. And I've never heard of an audit of the big confederations; how does vice-president Issa Hayou spend Africa's \$10 million grant, or where does Jack Warner at Concacaf bank his. There's clear evidence that

Warner has used his confederation's money to pay his debts.

Blatter may face a challenge when he stands for re-election next year and his vote-buying machine is gearing up. In the shadows expect to find Jean-Marie Weber – aka The Bagman – notorious for suitcasing \$100m in bribes to sports officials. Weber knows the names of everybody in sport who will take a bung and his skills may be essential if Blatter is to retain his crown.

Weber is banned from IOC meetings but is a paid consultant to CAF, the African confederation, and welcome at all Fifa functions. He's especially close to fellow marketing committee member Leo Mugabe, said to share the morals of his better-known uncle, Robert.

Delegates at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg on Thursday are promised "fruitful deliberations". Herr Blatter could commence by explaining what he meant when he blurted to a Swiss TV reporter last week that Fifa had made a mistake with the current sale of tickets and in future would take the business in house.

Delegates will be keen to know how this affects the president's nephew, who got a hefty chunk of the business – and failed lamentably. This scoop wasn't noticed by the other reporters and we'll see if it's soon forgotten.

In this new spirit of transparency Blatter could also change the habit of a lifetime and reveal how much he pays himself in salary, bonuses and perks. And will he and his Fifa departmental heads pay themselves big bonuses at Christmas for their brilliant organisation of the ticketing?

WORLD CUP BRIEFS

SLOVAKIA defender Martin Škrteľ suffered an ankle injury in a friendly against Costa Rica yesterday but will be fit for the finals in South Africa after a scan showed no serious damage.

The World Cup debutant went off in the 13th minute of the game – which Slovakia won 3-0 – and was taken to hospital for an immediate scan, which showed only swelling on the ankle. He has been ordered to rest for three days.

GHANA'S Michael Essien has spoken of the agonising moment he learned his World Cup had been scuppered by a long-standing knee injury.

Writing on Chelsea's website, Essien described the realisation he would not be fit in time to compete for Ghana at a second successive World Cup. "Since my injury in January I had been working hard to come back for Chelsea and Ghana but it wasn't to be," he said. "I had my last assessment over a week ago. It took place at the hotel where all the Ghanaian players were staying and coming out of that meeting was very emotional for me."

Essien suffered the injury in training with Ghana during January's African Cup of Nations finals. His last game for Chelsea was in early December in the Champions League.

CARLOS Queiroz insists he will not change his game-plan for Portugal's World Cup opener despite the likely absence of Ivory Coast captain Didier Drogba, who had an operation yesterday on a fractured arm.

"We are not going to change anything in our plans," Queiroz said. "When great players are out of a World Cup – as also happened with my great friend Rio Ferdinand – it's always a shame, a blow for the spectacle. But the strategy is to concentrate on ourselves. The longer we impose our game on the adversary, the more problems you create."

FRANZ Beckenbauer believes Germany should not be considered among the favourites to lift the World Cup after an injury-hit build-up.

Skipper Michael Ballack is the key absentee for Joachim Low's side after he picked up a foot injury while playing for club side Chelsea in the FA Cup final last month, while the loss of Rene Adler, Heiko Westermann, Simon Rolfes and Christian Träsch will also be keenly felt.

"Without Michael Ballack it will be difficult, our team is weakened," Beckenbauer said. "We'll have to work hard just to reach the semi-finals."

BRAZIL'S Kaka has dismissed concerns over the controversial ball which will be used in the World Cup. The Jabulani ball has been criticised by goalkeepers, who are worried about its movement at altitude.

Kaka – who had been struggling with a groin injury but insisted he was now in "great condition" – said, however: "Since I've been a footballer there have been criticisms of the ball. We have created this controversy but everyone is adapting and hopefully we will be champions with this ball."



South Africa v
Mexico
Friday
ITV 1
Kick-off 3pm