

S Africa narrowly miss World Cup win

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Bafana Bafana, the South African national team, nearly provided the World Cup host country with the perfect start to the tournament, drawing the opening game 1-1 with Mexico in a dramatic encounter that appeared to match the spirit and excitement of its football-mad fans.

A fine goal early in the second half by midfielder Siphiwe Tshabalala was greeted rapturously by all but a smattering of the 84,490 fans in the Soccer City stadium in Soweto, located on the fringes of the Sowetan townships. Across the country, South Africans have been caught up in a wave of euphoria in the build-up to the start of the first ever World Cup tournament in Africa. They dared to hope that the lowly ranked national team could match the public mood of optimism by winning the first match in what is a tough group.

It was not to be, as poor defending allowed Mexico a late equaliser. But as they drifted out of the stadium, South African fans could probably reflect on a game that their team could so easily have lost, having allowed Mexico to dominate the first half and come perilously close to conceding on numerous occasions.

The match was a fitting start to the tournament for organisers and team with the passion of the crowd unmistakable.

"We've never felt this close as nation," said Mamodupi Mohlala, 34, a top civil servant in the communications ministry. "All races, all classes, all denominations are behind Bafana Bafana. It is the biggest thing since 1994."

The cacophony of blaring vuvuzela horns began early in the morning on the streets of Johannesburg, continued during the match, and was set to go on throughout the night.

Ndgadila Okiwamgo, a 45 year old farmer from Namibia who dyed her hair in South Africa's national colours, refused to be downhearted after the match ended in a draw. "We played so well today. We will still reach the semi-final," she predicted.

About 84,000 people attended the match at a stadium which is one of six new or nearly new stadiums built for the tournament. Tens of thousands more saw the game on giant screens at specially designated fan parks, amid increasing optimism both about the organisation of the World Cup – the first to take place on African soil – and South Africa's chances of doing well.

"People were bouncing and blowing their vuvuzelas," said Bricks Mokolo, a 51 year old community activist and former professional footballer, who watched the game at a fan park in Sedibeng, a low income area near Johannesburg.

South Africa's minority white community – traditionally passionate about rugby – were also watching in large numbers. "There were lots of people here who don't normally watch football and they went ballistic when we scored. It was euphoric," said Kirat Lally, a 22 year old journalism student who saw the game at an upmarket fan village near Johannesburg airport. "The party is still going on".

The match was preceded by an opening ceremony including military fly-pasts, dancing and drumming, the seats packed with thousands of South African flags wearing the yellow colours of the Bafana Bafana (the boys, the boys) national team.

This was the culmination of a week of barely controlled excitement after six years of preparation for hosting Africa's first ever world cup.

Organisers' had hoped that Nelson Mandela would attend the game despite the 91-year-old's frail health. But he stayed away after the death last night of one of his great-granddaughters.

Zenani Mandela, 13, was killed in a car crash travelling back from the world cup celebration concert in Orlando Stadium, Soweto.

Joseph Blatter, the Fifa president, and Jacob Zuma, president of South Africa, paid tribute to Mr Mandela when they addressed the crowd just before kick-off. Mr Zuma told the crowd that Mr Mandela had told him: "The game must start. You must enjoy the game."

Mr Blatter, who had long campaigned to bring the world cup to Africa, said to ecstatic cheers: "Here we are. The Fifa world cup is in Africa."

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