

Brazil ready

It's almost time. The day Brazilians have been anxiously waiting for is finally arriving.

Brazil play Croatia tomorrow to get the home World Cup under way, beginning their quest for a sixth world title almost seven years after the nation was picked as hosts. After so much talk about delays, protests, and problems, fans at last are getting a chance to cheer for the national team on home soil in football's showcase tournament. If Brazil win the opening game, the fact that the stadium in Sao Paulo isn't even fully finished yet will quickly be forgotten. A loss, quite simply, is unthinkable for a nation whose identity is so closely linked to its football team. Brazil have not hosted the World Cup since 1950 when they endured a heartbreaking loss to Uruguay in the final. This time, everybody knows that only the title will be enough to please the home crowd. "We are all eager to get started, we are just counting the days," Brazil midfielder Ramires said yesterday. "We know that the fans have confidence in our team and they are behind us. We have to do everything possible to try to win this World Cup." Boosted by the home crowd, Brazil are one of the main favourites to recapture the trophy won by Spain four years ago in South Africa. But the other usual World Cup contenders will be trying to spoil the party in the land of football, including Germany, Italy, Argentina, and, the Netherlands, runners-up in 2010. Brazil are trying to become the first nation to win the World Cup at home since France did it in 1998. The Brazilians were eliminated in the quarter-finals of the last two tournaments, to France in 2006 and the Netherlands in 2010. Brazil will start the World Cup with the same line-up that won last year's warm-up tournament, the Confederations Cup, with 22-year-old Barcelona striker Neymar leading the team. Croatia, led by Real Madrid playmaker Luka Modric, will hope to pull off a monumental upset, but the team won't be at full strength against the hosts. Coach Niko Kovac won't have forward Mario Mandzukic, who was red-carded in the team's final qualifier, and experienced midfielder Niko Kranjcar, who had to be dropped from the squad because of a late hamstring injury. Novac was already without defender Josip Simunic, who was banned for 10 games by FIFA for leading fans in a pro-Nazi chant after a qualifying match.