Beat: Sports

Help or hindrance? Neymar s Brazil form under scrutiny

SPORTS NEWS

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USPA NEWS - Criticised for being selfish, profligate and over-dramatic, Neymar has struggled to such an extent at this World Cup that another flop in the knockout stage, starting against Mexico on Monday, might have terminal consequences for Brazil.

While his supporters regale his past exploits and point to the foot injury he suffered in February that kept him out of the game until June and left him short on match fitness, his detractors are starting to make themselves heard.

After three underwhelming performances, where his errors appeared to be those of a man trying to hog the limelight rather than play himself back to form and help his team, questions about his role in the side have become increasingly audible.

According to FIFA, the world´s most expensive player after costing Paris St Germain 222 million euros (196.35 million pounds) last year, has attempted more dribbles than anyone else in Russia with 42, a startling 14 more than nearest rival Lionel Messi.

Yet one of the more frustrating things about watching Brazil´s group games was the futility and persistence of Neymar´s efforts to take players on and, unsurprisingly, the statistics paint a dismal picture of his performance.

Neymar has given the ball away 84 times at this tournament, which after Brazil´s 2-0 victory over Serbia in their final group stage encounter, was 22 occasions more than any other player, according to Opta.

If the other parts of his game were all still razor sharp, he may be forgiven some occasional profligacy on the ball. Yet his wastefulness in front of goal is probably just as worrying for Brazil coach Tite as Brazil head into the knockout stages.

The 26-year-old has had 18 “˜goal opportunities´, according to FIFA, more than anyone else at the tournament, and yet scored once. Portugal´s Cristiano Ronaldo has had 10 and scored four.

EMOTIONAL VOLATILITY
Yet the finals have also been characterised by Neymar´s emotional volatility “” he broke down and wept after the 2-0 win over Costa Rica “” and a tendency to go down under the slightest contact.

The forward has spent so much time on the turf that one bar in Rio was offering a round of shots for every Neymar fall in the game against Serbia.

The punters were no doubt delighted when, after one challenge from Serbia´s Adem Ljajic, Neymar rolled on the ground a full 4-1/2 times before coming to a stop, much to the amusement and disdain of the watching millions.

Perhaps, as Tite suggests, he is feeling the weight of shouldering the hopes of the world´s most expectant football nation.

Yet his struggles have nonetheless left fans and pundits wondering whether on current form he is a help or a hindrance to a Brazil side with numerous other “˜Galacticos´.

With Roberto Firmino, one of football´s most selfless runners, waiting on the bench, the five-times champions have attacking options which do not involve Neymar.

There are knowledgeable voices in the game who think the former Barcelona player would even benefit from a spell out of the spotlight.

“He´s (Neymar) still trying to impress everybody with his skills, and still nothing is really happening,“ said former Manchester United and Denmark goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel. “His current standard and his current level “” it might not be a bad idea to give him a bit of

a break.“

On Monday, Brazil face a Mexico side who have lost six times in a row in the last 16, but have won seven of their last 15 encounters against Brazil, losing just five times.

There is little realistic chance of Neymar, one of the modern game´s global icons, being dropped for the match in Samara “” it is now up to him to show that concerns about his form are misplaced.

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