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Batistuta has World Cup on his mind

By Gideon Long

ROME, April 13 (Reuters) - It has not been the best of weeks for Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta.

On Monday, his eagerly awaited return to Florence to face Fiorentina as an AS Roma player ended in a 3-1 defeat and on Wednesday he was left out of his national squad.

Roma's setback meant their lead at the top of Serie A was cut to six points and Batistuta's long-cherished dream of winning the Italian league title is under threat.

The decision of Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa to drop him from his squad for a World Cup qualifier later this month is probably no more than a precaution - the Argentines have virtually qualified for the tournament and Roma need Batistuta's services more than his country does.

Nevertheless, it leaves Argentina's greatest goalscorer on the sidelines once again.

Batistuta missed Argentina's classy defeat of Italy in a friendly in February with a knee injury and, in his absence, Lazio's Hernan Crespo and Valencia's Kily Gonzalez were outstanding, staking their claims for places in the starting line-up at next year's World Cup.

But Batistuta, who has scored a record 54 times for his country in 74 appearances, is adamant that he will be more than simply a spectator at the 2002 tournament in Japan and Korea.

"Absolutely," he told Reuters in a recent interview when asked if he would get his chance to play at the World Cup. "I'm convinced I'll be playing.

"I know I'm closer to the end of my career than to the start. But as for the end of my career, that depends on what the physios here at Roma say. I hope it won't be too soon."

Batistuta made his Argentine debut in a friendly against Brazil in March 1991 and announced his arrival later that year with six goals in six matches as Argentina won the Copa America.

His feat earned him a transfer to Italy where he began his love affair with Fiorentina.

In nine seasons in Florence, "Batigol" scored 168 league goals in 269 appearances, breaking all the club's records. In return, he won just one trophy - the Italian Cup in 1996 - and had to endure a season in the second division.

Fiorentina supporters famously built a statue of him in his honour and he regularly returns to the Tuscan regional capital for public functions and award ceremonies.

When he walked out on the pitch in Florence on Monday, he was greeted by warm applause from most of those present.

"Bati. Thank you for nine years of life," read one banner held aloft by Fiorentina fans behind the goals.

Aged 32, Batistuta now has the chance of crowning his career by winning arguably the two biggest titles of his life - the Italian "scudetto" and the World Cup.

Argentina look superb under Bielsa and are five points clear of their rivals in the South American qualifying group.

"I think this is a stronger squad than the one we had at the last World Cup," Batistuta said. "It's more experienced, more of the players are playing in Europe and a lot of us have got an extra World Cup under our belts."

"I can't say that we're stronger than the sides which won the cup in 1978 and 1986 because so far we haven't won anything," he added.

"Let's make comparisons only after we've lifted a cup."

On the domestic front, Batistuta has confounded his critics who said that at his age he was not worth the 70 billion lire (\$32 million) which Roma paid to coax him away from Fiorentina.

He has scored 14 Serie A goals and has again demonstrated his ability to shake off knee injuries which have plagued him in recent years.

"I had faith in my own goalscoring abilities when I came to Roma. I still believed in myself," he said. "I also believed that Roma could be top of the league, although I didn't think they would be this far in front."

Batistuta's career is all the more remarkable for the fact that he came to football late. As a schoolboy in Reconquista he preferred basketball and was nicknamed "el gordo" (the fat one) by his team mates because he was slightly overweight.

When he retires, he plans to return to Argentina.

"Things are not great there at the moment but, yes, I'll almost certainly return when I retire," he said.

"I don't know what I'll do yet. The only thing that is certain is that I won't go into coaching."

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