

High-stakes openers

BY PAUL KENNEDY

Thanks to the luck of the draw, the Hexagonal opens Feb. 28 with three derbies: USA-Mexico, Jamaica-Trinidad & Tobago and Costa Rica-Honduras.

Trinidad & Tobago and Honduras, both missing from the '97 Hexagonal, have a chance to set the opening pace by picking up points on the road.

JAMAICA-TRINIDAD & TOBAGO. T&T is spending big money on its bid to finally qualify for the World Cup. The Soca Warriors will have traveled to Grenada, Brazil, England and the Cayman Islands before heading to Kingston.

Jamaican officials, on the other hand, are scrambling to put a team together.

With Onandi Lowe suspended, the Boyz are targeting two of the English First Division's top strikers: Crystal Palace's Clinton Morrison and Fulham's Barry Hayles.

Thousands of Jamaicans attended the public funeral of Stevie Malcolm, killed in a car crash on the way home after a friendly against Bulgaria. Police have been trying to question suspected driver Theodore Whitmore, who was injured in the crash.



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Jamaica has been courting high-scoring Crystal Palace striker Clinton Morrison (left, in English League Cup action against Liverpool's Stephane Henchoz).

Days later, goalie Aaron Lawrence was involved in another car accident that left a pedestrian dead. He's now out with an injury suffered in training.

COSTA RICA-HONDURAS. Both teams also had bad pre-Hexagonal experiences.

They struggled to find decent opposition for tuneups, and they lost their stars for the opener: Tico Paulo Wanchope and Catracho Carlos Pavon, both out with knee injuries.

Honduras enters with a big psychological edge, though. It's unbeaten in its last six trips to Costa Rica, beating the Ticos four times (3-2 in World Cup '94 qualifying, 1-0 and 2-1 at the '99 UNCAF Cup and 4-1 in a '98 friendly) and tying them in two other friendlies (1-1 in 1996 and 1-1 in 1999).

(Paul Kennedy is the managing editor of Soccer America.)