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Now soccer has a rabbit ball too

Attackers, goalies believe new World Cup balls are juiced



Lee Jae-Won / Reuters FILE

The 2002 FIFA World Cup official match ball, the Adidas Fevernova, is not popular with all the players.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEOUL, South Korea, May 29 — Now World Cup soccer has a lively ball, too. Across Japan and South Korea, attackers and goalkeepers have come to the same conclusion many baseball players and fans have reached in the United States: The balls are juiced.

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“IT’S THE BIGGEST difference in balls that I’ve ever seen,” U.S. forward Brian McBride said. “It’s been a nightmare for the goalkeepers because if you shoot it right, it flies. If you don’t shoot it on center, it doesn’t go. There might be a few more spectacular goals.”

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Unveiled at last December’s draw by Adidas, the Fevernova ball replaced Tricolore, used four years ago in France. At the U.S. World Cup in 1994, the Questra was used.

“It is a truly revolutionary ball,” FIFA said in its announcement. “The improved syntactic foam layer, consisting of highly compressible and extremely durable gas-filled micro-

balloons, has remarkable energy return properties and additional cushioning for enhanced control and accuracy.”

Don’t give that mumbo-jumbo to the goalkeepers. They’re not thrilled about having to stop it.

“I think it’s a terrible ball. It doesn’t fly straight,” said Kasey Keller, who slightly injured his left elbow in practice Wednesday. Team doctors said it was minor, but he missed Thursday’s training session.

Brad Friedel, Keller’s goalkeeping colleague and rival, said it’s hard to control and harder to see because it’s gray.

“The ball’s not made for goalkeepers,” he said.

“They want more goals.”

For months, the U.S. team has been using the ball in practice, but because Nike is a sponsor, the Americans don't have much game experience with the supercharged sphere. And when they did use it against Ireland, the game was played in a downpour — when any ball would tend to get slow.

Some U.S. players said this ball picks up speed when the temperature gets warmer. Forward Joe-Max Moore described how the ball knuckles when it's hit on the sweet spot. That allows it to take off.

DaMarcus Beasley prefers this ball to the ones he usually gets, saying “it feels so soft on the foot — even if you pump it up hard, it feels soft.” During U.S. practice, Beasley claims it's been whacked more than 70 yards.

“The MLS ball needs some work,” he said. “You can't really kick it well. It's not ideal, I guess.”

Earnie Stewart is the U.S. attacker most experienced with rabbit balls — and dead balls. He plays in the Dutch first division.

“In Holland, every team has its own ball. You have to get used to it,” he said.

When NAC Breda, Stewart's team, gets to town, it practices with balls provided by the home team.

“They're always flat,” he said. “You get the older balls.”

It's not just American players who have noticed. Belgium's Marc Wilmots is predicting goofy goals — and perhaps bloody noses for goalkeepers who get their faces in front of shots.



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“It has phenomenal swerve,” he said. “We will have bizarre goals from 30 meters. We will have comical goals.”

U.S. coach Bruce Arena predicts a lot of action in front of the nets.

“With this ball,” he said, “there are going to be rebounds.”

Notes: One week before the Americans' opener against Portugal, Arena still wouldn't say Wednesday whether Friedel or Keller would

start. ... DaMarcus Beasley, at 57 kilos (126 pounds), is the lightest player in the tournament, according the weights listed on FIFA's rosters. Brazil's Juninho Paulista is the second lightest at 58 kilos (128 pounds). ... Following Uruguay's withdrawal from Tuesday's scheduled scrimmage, the U.S. team scheduled a Thursday scrimmage against regional rival Costa Rica. ... The Americans have the day off Friday. Each player can choose between visiting the DMZ between North and South Korea or playing golf.

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