

# Last mission before the break



REUTERS, London

England, Italy, Spain and Germany are in action on Wednesday as a marathon European season draws near to an end with 18 Euro 2004 qualifiers across the continent.

England look to keep pace with Group Seven leaders Turkey by beating Slovakia, while Italy need to overcome hosts Finland to close the gap on Wales who occupy top spot in Group Nine.

In other highlights, Group Five leaders Germany visit the Faroe Islands, Spain aim to recover from a shock home defeat by Greece when they travel to Northern Ireland in Group Six and local rivals Denmark and Norway continue their tussle for Group Two supremacy against Luxembourg and Romania.

Spain's players will then have to pick themselves up for one last burst in the final two matches of their domestic first division.

England lost top spot on Saturday when Turkey beat Slovakia 1-0, and Sven-Goran Eriksson's team need three points from the Slovaks to keep up with the World Cup semi-finalists, who play Macedonia on Wednesday. Eriksson, without suspended

captain David Beckham and injured first-choice central defenders Rio Ferdinand and Sol Campbell, is well aware of the importance of the match. "Wednesday we have to win and that's the most important thing," he said. "Things depend on us and, hopefully, we can go to Turkey (for the final qualifier in October) with this position." Eriksson will probably start with teenager Wayne Rooney alongside captain Michael Owen in attack, with Phil Neville continuing in the midfield holding role he occupied in last week's 2-1 friendly victory over Serbia & Montenegro.

Italy, who trail Wales by five points in Group Nine, face a tricky trip to Finland, who should be buoyed by their emphatic 3-0 victory over Serbia & Montenegro on Saturday. The Italians, who have chalked up four straight wins in qualifiers and friendlies this year including a 2-0 home victory over Finland, will field a new look strike force in the absence of injured Christian Vieri.

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni is set to play Alessandro Del Piero and Francesco Totti behind Lazio's Bernardo Corradi.

"We are going there to win because we are in a good moment of form," said Trapattoni. "If we don't do it then there are the playoffs, although at my age I have no desire to undertake re-sit exams in November."

Spain received a rude awakening when they lost 1-0 to Greece, their first home qualifying defeat for 12 years.

"We knew that this could happen to us one day," Spain captain Raul said. "I can't wait for the next match because I am convinced that this was just a piece of bad fortune and that we are a much better side than Greece."

Spain need to beat Northern Ireland, bottom of the group with one point from four matches, to stay ahead of the Greeks and Ukraine, who meet on Wednesday. Germany, held to a 1-1 draw in Scotland on Saturday, will take control of Group Five with victory in the Faroes, though Lithuania will stay in contention if they overcome Iceland.

Denmark beat Norway 1-0 on Saturday to leave the two sides locked together on 10 points at the head of Group Two, but Romania are only one point adrift and victory in Norway would leave them well placed to edge out the Scandinavian duo for top spot.

The Czech Republic will draw level with Group Three leaders the Netherlands if they beat a Moldova side fresh from an upset victory over Austria, who look to recover from that humiliating loss in a home game against Belarus.

In Group 10, leaders

Switzerland play Albania and Ireland face Georgia, while in Group Eight Estonia meet Croatia and Belgium take on Andorra as they look to close the gap on leaders Bulgaria.

Sweden and Hungary have the chance to leapfrog surprise Group Four leaders Latvia, the Swedes entertaining Poland and Hungary travelling to San Marino.

## FIXTURES

Euro 2004 qualifiers to be played on Wednesday:

- Group Two:** Luxembourg v Denmark, Norway v Romania
- Group Three:** Czech Republic v Moldova, Austria v Belarus
- Group Four:** Sweden v Poland, San Marino v Hungary
- Group Five:** Faroe Islands v Germany, Lithuania v Iceland
- Group Six:** Northern Ireland v Spain, Greece v Ukraine
- Group Seven:** England v Slovakia, Turkey v Macedonia
- Group Eight:** Estonia v Croatia, Belgium v Andorra
- Group Nine:** Finland v Italy, Azerbaijan v Serbia and Montenegro
- Group Ten:** Ireland v Georgia, Switzerland v Albania



TOUCH DOWN! Italian defender Alessandro Nesta leaves the Alitalia flight that brought the squad to Helsinki on June 9.



Michael Owen, the stand-in captain of England, in a cheerful mood during a press briefing at Middlesbrough yesterday.

# 'Qatar was a nightmare'

## Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Veteran Brazilian striker Romario spoke of his regret on Monday of his move to Qatar where he spent three months, was paid \$1.2 million, played three games and failed to score a goal.

"If I'd known it was going to be so bad, I wouldn't have gone," he told reporters after arriving at Rio de Janeiro airport to re-sign for Fluminense.

The former Barcelona, PSV Eindhoven and Valencia striker, who says he still hopes to score 1,000 goals in his career and emulate Pele's achievement, said his stint with Al Sadd had set him back considerably.

"Professionally, it was not a positive season," he said.

"I lost sight of my target, which is to get to the 1,000 goals mark."

Romario was given a rousing reception when he arrived in Qatar at the end of February but his problems began when he was blocked from playing in the Asian Champions League because he had not been registered in time.

He then fell out with the team coach who wanted Romario to change his style of play -- which basically involves lurking in the opposition's penalty area and waiting for the ball.

"My problem was the coach, everything else was perfect," he said.

Romario led Fluminense to the semi-finals of last year's Brazilian championship, scoring 12 goals in the process, and had signed a new one-year contract at the start of this year before being tempted by the offer from Qatar.

During his first spell at Fluminense, Romario, who scored

five goals in Brazil's victorious 1994 World Cup campaign, enjoyed much-publicised privileges.

He was allowed his own physio-therapist, traveled separately away games, often arriving only one hour before kick-off, was excused practice on the days after games and often trained alone.

Fluminense are 12th in the 24-team Brazilian championship one quarter of the way in the competition.

Romario said he wanted to play in Saturday's match at home to table-propping Goias but admitted that he faced an almost impossible task in finishing as top-scorer, having given Sao Paulo's Luis Fabiano an 11-goal headstart.

"Wherever I go, I always say I want to be champion and top-scorer but in this case, being top-scorer looks more difficult than winning the title," he said.

Romario calculates that he has scored 864 goals in his career, though this total is open to debate as it is believed to include youth matches before he turned professional.

Romario will be free to play for Fluminense on June 14.

"I want to play. I miss a full stadium, seeing the fans and scoring goals," said Romario.

The Brazilian turned down another offer in Qatar and from an English side to play at home, stating that he still had the desire to play and had no plans to retire in the near future.

Meanwhile, on his arrival lawyers acting on behalf of his former wife Monica said they would be requesting the footballer's arrest for alleged non-payment of 420,000 dollars in maintenance for his two children and alimony.

# Rustu set for Barca

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's national goalkeeper Rustu Recber is poised to leave Fenerbahce after nine years with the Turkish outfit for Spanish giants Barcelona.

Rustu, considered one of the best goalkeepers in the world, told the Vatan daily Tuesday that he expected to sign a final contract with Barcelona within two weeks.

The 30-year-old explained he had reached a preliminary deal with Joan Laporta, who will stand for Barcelona's presidency on Sunday.

"But even if he is not elected, I think I will be still with Barcelona in the coming season," he said.

"It is a childhood dream coming true," added Rustu, who is reported to have turned down offers from English sides Manchester United and Arsenal.

The pony-tailed goalie, also famous for smearing black polish under his eyes, was one of the stars of the 2002 World Cup with sensational performances which helped Turkey to third place in just their second ever tournament.

# Family first

REUTERS, Sao Paulo

Brazil's World Cup captain Cafu said that family reasons were behind his decision to join European champions AC Milan rather than accepting an offer to play in Japan.

"I talked to my family and we preferred to stay in Italy," said the 33-year-old right-back, who was a free agent after leaving AS Roma at the end of this season.

Cafu, the only player to have played in three World Cup finals, had been expected to join Japanese club Yokohama Marinos before Milan's announcement on Monday they had agreed terms on a deal which would run until June 2005.

The player said he was looking forward to returning to Yokohama, scene of Brazil's World Cup final win over Germany last year, where Milan will face the eventual South American champions in December for the World Club championship.

"I've already had success there with Brazil and I hope to have some more with Milan," he said.

Cafu joined Roma from Brazilian club Palmeiras in 1997 and was a part of the side who won the Italian title in 2001.

# World champs in Africa

## One goalie available only!

## Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil arrived in Nigeria for Wednesday's friendly international with only one goalkeeper after Fabio missed the plane from Sao Paulo on Sunday night, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said.

Fabio's absence is the latest blow to the world champions, who have been forced to throw together an improvised squad for the match and the Confederations Cup in France because the country's domestic championship is still in full swing.

Fabio played for Vasco da Gama in their match away to Juventude in Caxias do Sul, southern Brazil, on Sunday afternoon but his flight to Sao Paulo was cancelled because of bad weather, the CBF said.

The rest of the home-based players left from Sao Paulo on Sunday night on a flight to Paris, from where they were due to travel to Abuja on a charter flight on Monday evening.

Fabio will have to travel alone and is not expected in Nigeria until Tuesday evening, leaving Dida of European champions AC Milan as the lone goalkeeper, the CBF said.

Julio Cesar, the third goalkeeper in the Confederations Cup squad, did not travel to Nigeria because his club Flamengo are involved in the second leg of the Copa Brasil final against Cruzeiro on Wednesday night.

Brazil will spend less than 48 hours in the West African country as they arrive on Monday night and leave immediately after Wednesday's game.

Coach Carlos Alberto Parreira agreed not to pick more than two players from any given Brazilian club for the Confederations Cup, although Atletico Paranaense and Cruzeiro agreed to make exceptions and release three apiece.

He has not called on any players from domestic champions Santos, who are still in the South American Libertadores Cup, and is resting several of the foreign legion such as Ronaldo, Rivaldo, Roberto Carlos, Cafu and Gilberto Silva.

Critics blame the CBF for the problem, saying the confederation should have stopped domestic football while the Confederations Cup was being played.

Brazil, on their eighth trip to Africa, are seeking to maintain their 100 percent record against African opposition.

It will be the 14th time that Brazil played against an African country since their first contact with the continent in 1960, when they beat Egypt 3-0 in Cairo.

Brazil's unbeaten record also includes wins at the World Cup finals over Algeria, Cameroon and Morocco. They have scored 37 goals and conceded just six.

Only South Africa have come close to beating Brazil, leading 2-0 at halftime when they first met in Johannesburg in 1996 and then watching in awe as Mario Zagallo's young side came back to snatch a 3-2 win.

Added to their successful record in Africa is a 2-0 win for Brazil over Portugal, with goals from Jairzinho and Rivelino, in a friendly played at Lourenco Marques, then part of the Portuguese east African colony, in June 1968.

Today the city is known as Maputo and capital of an independent Mozambique.

On Wednesday, the world champions play at another cavernous venue, Nigeria's national stadium built for the All-Africa Games to be staged in October.

Nigeria, meeting Brazil for the first time at senior level, have played three times at the new stadium, beating Ghana, Cameroon's Olympic team and Malawi who were crushed 4-1 in an African Nations Cup qualifier last Saturday.



WELCOME TO AFRICA: Brazil's Ronaldo waves to dancers of the Great Odenigbo Cultural Troupe on arrival at Nnamdi Azikiwe Abuja International Airport in Nigeria on June 9.

# Beckham flexible

## Football

AFP, Los Angeles

England's favourite son, football star David Beckham, has for the first time indicated he would quit his beloved Manchester United team if he is no longer wanted there.

The 28-year-old football legend made the comments in an interview with the Los Angeles Times newspaper published here Monday after Man U's public admission that they are ready to sell their star of more than a decade.

"I'm contracted to Man United for another two or three years, I think," the England captain told the paper during a private visit to the United States. "As long as they want me, then I'll stay."

"But I've never said that I'd never move away from Manchester, and I've never said that I'd end my career there," he added in the first public hint that he would use the door if it was held open for him.

The comments came as the star midfielder looked increasingly certain to leave United after the English Premiership champions confirmed they had "firm interest" from clubs in Spain and Italy.

But just weeks ago, Beckham issued a statement saying he wanted to remain at Old Trafford.

They also followed growing speculation that Beckham may be transferred to European clubs Real Madrid, AC Milan, Barcelona or Inter Milan after Man U confirmed Sunday it was open to offers for their star player.

In his interview with the newspaper, Beckham looked to the future of Man U and appeared resigned to his glory days at Old Trafford drawing to a close.

"There will always be changes at a team like Man United," he told the Times.

"With all the big teams there's always going to be changes because you look to strengthen the team whether you win three trophies or you win one," he said.

Real Madrid has emerged as the leading contender for Beckham's services after AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi appeared Monday to rule out any bid for the midfielder, declaring Beckham to be over-priced.

The England captain, who is as famous for his hairstyles and jetset

lifestyle as for his on-field skills, has been valued in the region of 30 million pounds (50 million dollars) by Manchester United.

"There are a lot better ways of spending money other than buying Beckham," said Berlusconi, whose bitter city rivals Inter Milan may step in with a bid.

Beckham, who is due back in England later this week, denied he had launched any efforts to find a new home and dismissed the frantic speculation, clearly indicating he was not seeking to leave.

"These rumours have been going on for two months now," he said. "About a month ago, it was Real Madrid and now it's Barcelona."

"But I'm a Man United player. I'm contracted to Man United for another two or three years, I think. As long as they want me, then I'll stay," he said.

Beckham denied rumours that



DAVID BECKHAM

his time at Man U could be drawing to an end because of repeated clashes with team manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"Despite what people say about me and Sir Alex Ferguson, he's been a father figure for me," Beckham insisted.

"I've been at Man United for like 12 years now and without him I wouldn't be the player or the person that I am today, because he had the confidence when I was 18 years old to put me in the first team and a number of other young players in the first team."

"Of course you have your ups and downs with any boss in any job, but it's just a little bit more highlighted with me and him," he added.



EVERGREEN: Brazilian superstar Romario, wearing the shirt of his new team Fluminense gestures to fans upon his arrival at Rio de Janeiro's international airport on June 9.

# Considerate Army!

## Football

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's star striker Ahn Jung-Hwan, undergoing military service, has been given a special dispensation to play in Wednesday's friendly international against Argentina.

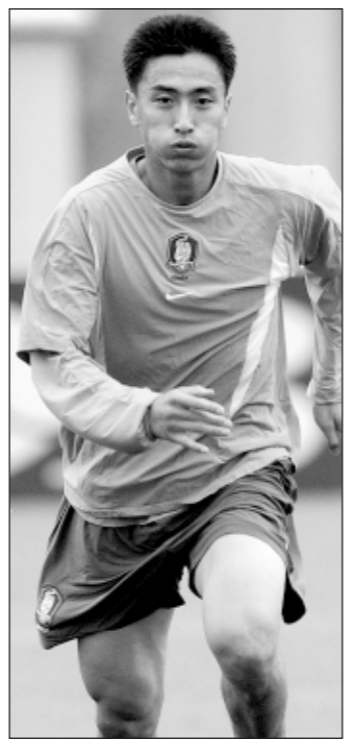
The Japan-based star whose familiar flowing locks were shorn when he began a one-month stint at barracks near Seoul a week ago will be released from his unit to join Tuesday training with the national squad.

Ahn, 27, scored the only goal in South Korea's victory over Japan on May 31 in Tokyo and was sorely missed in the 2-0 defeat to Uruguay in Seoul on Sunday.

South Korean fans besieged the Defense Ministry website following the defeat, begging that Ahn be released to face Argentina.

"The South Korean soccer fans sent volleys of emails to the Defense Ministry website calling for Ahn to play in the game," said Korea Football Association (KFA) spokesman Son Seung-Sam.

"It is an unusual step for the Defense Ministry to allow him to do



THE ARMY MAN! South Korean star Ahn Jung-Hwan trains with the national squad at Paju on June 10.

so. But the Defense Ministry and the KFA cannot ignore the people's will."

He said a KFA proposal that Ahn take a two-day break from military service and return to his unit after the game was accepted by the Defense Ministry.

The South Korean side under new coach Humberto Coelho have scored only one goal -- from Ahn -- in their last four matches.

They dominated possession and created many scoring chances in the second half against Uruguay but their finish was poor.

Korean men are required to perform 26 months of compulsory service, but top soccer players like Ahn get away with four weeks of basic training.

Argentina, which defeated Japan 4-1 in Osaka in a friendly on Sunday, will present a tougher test than Uruguay for South Korea.

Coelho will rely on the same squad of players with the addition of Ahn against Argentina.

Coelho, who took over from Guus Hiddink, the Dutchman who led South Korea to the semi-finals of last year's World cup, has one victory, two defeats, and a draw in his four games in charge so far.