

Beckham leads England

Football

AFP, Ipswich

England captain David Beckham marked his first game on home soil since his multi-million pound transfer to Real Madrid by inspiring England to a 3-1 victory over Croatia here at Portman Road on Wednesday.

Beckham scored with a first-half penalty and then turned provider when he helped Michael Owen double England's lead just after the interval.

Croatia's Ivica Mornar narrowed

handed to give England a penalty. Beckham stepped up and smashed the ball past goalkeeper Stipe Pletkosa to give England the lead after a cagey opening when neither side threatened to score.

Otto Barić's team nearly fell further behind in the 11th minute when Emile Heskey collected a pass from Steven Gerrard and wriggled clear of two Croatian defenders only to scuff his shot wide.

Sven-Goran Eriksson's side were starting to control the game and Croatia's Niko Kovac could only prevent another England attack with a wild lunge on Nicky Butt in the 12th minute.

starting to trouble the England defence and in the 37th minute Olic scorched away from Cole and crossed to Marijo Maric. And the burly striker sent his header goalbound but James managed to block it away with his shins.

Croatia became more involved in the game but England nearly doubled their lead in the 43rd minute when Michael Owen flicked the ball to Heskey who raced past his marker only to blast a stinging shot straight at the Croat keeper from just outside the penalty area.

England did score a second in the 51st minute when Beckham whipped in a trademark cross to Owen, who ghosted away from the



PHOTO: AFP

David Beckham leaves Croatia's Robert Kovac behind during their international friendly Portman Road Stadium in Ipswich on August 20.

the lead in the 77th minute but Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard made sure of victory when he scored England's third with ten minutes remaining.

Beckham, who was making his return to the England side following his 25 million pounds (35m dollars) move to Real Madrid from Manchester United, finally managed to unlock the Croatian defence in the tenth minute when he hoisted a high ball for Owen to chase in the Croat penalty area.

Josip Simunic fractionally lost sight of the ball and under pressure from Owen the rugged defender

Referee Bo Larsen gave Kovac a yellow card and the booking seemed to energise Croatia who launched a series of first-half raids on the England goal.

In the 23rd minute Ivica Olic sped past Ashley Cole and flashed a crossfield pass to Milan Rapaić who headed the ball over the bar.

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard replaced Butt in the 27th minute as the Manchester United midfielder was struggling to shake off the effects of Kovac's shrike challenge.

Olic's speed and trickery were

Croat rearguard to direct a bullet header past Pletkosa.

With a 2-0 lead, Eriksson replaced Paul Scholes and David Beckham with Joe Cole and Kieron Dyer after an hour.

And with England protecting their lead, Croatia managed to narrow the deficit in the 77th minute when substitute Ivica Mornar stabbed the ball past Paul Robinson - who had replaced James after the interval.

Lampard added England's third goal when he blasted a 20-yard shot past the Croat keeper to restore England's two goal lead.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

International friendly results on Wednesday:

At Chaves, Portugal Portugal 1 (Sabrosa 64) Kazakhstan 0

At Tallinn Estonia 1 (Lemalu 90) Poland 2 (Sobolewski 51, Wichniarek 90)

At Vaduz Liechtenstein 2 (Frick 16, Burgmeier 23) San Marino 2 (Gasperoni 39, Ciacchi 45)

At Riga Latvia 0 Uzbekistan 3 (Akopians 41, Soliev 80, Gueinrikh 86)

At Ankara Turkey 2 (Kahveci 30, Yilmaz 55) Moldova 0

At Minsk Belarus 2 (Romashchenko 9-pen, Shtantyk 40) Iran 1 (Nouri 84)

At Donetsk, Ukraine Ukraine 0 Romania 2 (Mutu 28-pen, 57)

At Prilep, Macedonia Macedonia 3 (Naumovski 9, Pandev 36, Dimitrovski 77)

Albania 1 (Skala 74)

At Murska Sobota, Slovenia Slovenia 2 (Sukalo 3, Cimerotic 76) Hungary 1 (Feher 90)

At Moscow Russia 1 (Semak 85) Israel 2 (Nimny 52, Balli 81)

At Tianjin, China China 0 Chile 0

At Tokyo Japan 3 (Takahara 1, 39, Endo 72) Nigeria 0

At Florence, Italy Argentina 3 (Veron 45, Samuel 86, D'Alessandro 89) Uruguay 2 (Forlan 4, Liguera 53)

At Copenhagen Denmark 1 (Gronkjaer 42) Finland 1 (Riihilahti 88)

At Sofia Bulgaria 3 (Dimitrov 23, 44, Berbatov 31) Lithuania 0

At Ipswich, England England 3 (Beckham 10-pen, Owen 50, Lampard 80) Croatia 1 (Mornar 77)

At Brussels Belgium 1 (Sonck 39) Netherlands 1 (Makaay 55)

At Norrköping, Sweden Sweden 1 (Anders Svensson 16) Greece 2 (Giannakopoulos 63, Kafes 69)

At Vienna Austria 2 (Glieder 34-pen, Wallner 70) Costa Rica 0

At Stuttgart, Germany Germany 0 Italy 1 (Vieri 17)

At Geneva, Switzerland Switzerland 0 France 2 (Wiltord 13, Marlet 55)

At Tunis Tunisia 0 Guinea 0

At Oslo Norway 0 Scotland 0

At New York Colombia 0 Slovakia 0

At East Rutherford, New Jersey Peru 3 (Pizarro 1, Zegarra 31, Solano 33) Mexico 1 (Trujillo 54)

At Panama City Panama 1 (Solis 77) Paraguay 2 (Campos 6, Gamarra 17)



PHOTO: AFP

Italy's goal-machine Christian Vieri (L) starts celebrating his strike against German while goalkeeper Oliver Kahn looks on during their friendly at Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium in Stuttgart, on August 20.

Vieri makes the difference

Football

AFP, Stuttgart

Giovanni Trapattoni enjoyed a victorious return to German soil as his Italian side edged World Cup finalists Germany 1-0 in front of a capacity 50,000 fans at the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium here Wednesday.

A goal from Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri after 17 minutes handed former Bayern Munich coach Trapattoni, renowned in Germany for his passionate press conferences, victory in Stuttgart, although a makeshift German side can consider themselves unfortunate not to salvage a draw after a string of goalscoring chances in the

second period.

"You are always disappointed to lose an international match at home," explained German coach Rudi Voller.

"We played really well in the second half. The only criticism is that we did not take our chances."

Oliver Kahn echoed the comments of his coach, declaring: "Italy have the ball in the net in a split second while we need 300 chances."

The decisive goal from Vieri came after the Australian-born striker played a sublime one-two with Francesco Totti before slotting home.

Germany, beset by injuries with the likes of Michael Ballack, Dietmar Hamann and Torsten Frings absent,

saw Alessandro Del Piero roll the ball into Oliver Kahn's net four minutes later only for the linesman to rule the effort out for offside.

However, Rudi Voller's charges, wearing black armbands to honour recently deceased World Cup heroes Helmut Rahn and Lothar Emmerich, came out a transformed side after the interval and substitute Miroslav Klose, who had been on the pitch less than sixty seconds, came within inches of equalising on the hour mark with his goal-bound effort narrowly cleared off the line by Christian Panucci.

Bernd Schneider and the ubiquitous Klose, who was later booked for diving in the penalty area, both went close as Germany lifted the home crowd and they were left gasping in

the 72nd minute when Jens Jeremies thundered a shot against the crossbar.

However, despite their efforts the hosts could not break down a typically obstinate Azzurri defence as Italy held onto their slender advantage to take the spoils.

German national coach Rudi Voller, a 1990 World Cup victor in Italy, would have hoped for a better result before the European 2004 Championship qualifiers with Iceland and Scotland in early September, but knows he will have key players back from injury for the crunch clashes.

Meanwhile, Trapattoni will be happy with the win as Italy build up for their crunch Euro 2004 qualifier with Wales on September 5.

France at a canter

Football

AFP, Eneva, Switzerland

France warmed up for their Euro 2004 qualifying run-in with a comfortable 2-0 win over Switzerland here on Wednesday.

Sylvain Wiltord tapped in on 13 minutes and set up the second for substitute Steve Marlet who put the match beyond doubt nine minutes after the break.

France manager Jacques Santini felt his side had had a good work-out, picking up when they left off in June with the Confederations Cup triumph.

"We played as if it was a competitive match," said Santini. It was good that certain players were back on their marks after the

Confederations Cup, even though we already knew their talents."

But though he played goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, relegated to third choice at Manchester United, he diplomatically left out Real Madrid midfielder Claude Makelele, who has refused to train with his club over a pay dispute.

"For several years, Barthez has proved his worth as he has shown once again tonight.

"As for Makelele, it was wiser considering his preparation to not have him play an international match."

"This bodes well for the future," said Thierry Henry who made way for goalscorer Marlet at half-time.

France took the lead a minute later when Wiltord grabbed his 18th goal for Les Bleus.

Real Madrid star Zinedine Zidane clipped a ball through from

deep midfield and Wiltord raced through the Swiss defence.

Goalkeeper Jorg Stiel raced out to meet the Arsenal forward, who shot, forcing the Monchengladbach keeper into a dive.

But Wiltord had missed his kick completely and the ball ran under Stiel, leaving the attacker to pass the ball in.

Santini brought on Fulham striker Steve Marlet for Henry at half-time and the move paid off when he struck his fifth international goal nine minutes later.

Wiltord burst forward down the left wing and zipped a square pass to Marlet on the edge of the box.

The 29-year-old sidefooted his shot which skidded through Liverpool defender Stephane Henchoz's feet, taking a slight deflection and unsuspecting Stiel whose late dive was in vain.

Crespo in Blues?

AFP, Rome

Big-spending English Premiership side Chelsea are close to signing Inter Milan's Argentine ace Hernan Crespo, according to Italian media reports on Thursday.

Inter directors Marco Branca and Gabriele Oriani were reported to be in London along with Crespo's agent Fernando Hidalgo trying to thrash out a deal with the Stamford Bridge club.

"Hernan's future is uncertain. The player and Inter will take a decision when Chelsea present an offer," Hidalgo told the Corriere dello Sport.

The paper said Chelsea were preparing to table a 33 million euro (36.2 million dollar) offer for the 28-year-old striker and that the transfer could be completed within days.

Chelsea have signed a number of big names since Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich took over the club, but are still looking for another striker to increase their attacking options.

Crespo has scored 108 goals in Serie A, won the UEFA Cup with Parma in 1999, and scored 19 goals in 36 matches for his country.

Russia coach steps down

AFP, Moscow

Russian coach Valery Gazyayev resigned Thursday after criticising his players for losing at home in a friendly against Israel.

Russian Football Union (RFU) president Vyacheslav Koloskov accepted Gazyayev's resignation, the RFU press office said.

The coach told a press conference late Wednesday after Russia's 1-2 home defeat that he was considering stepping down and would announce his decision the next day.

He denounced an "unacceptable lack of will" among Russian team players.

The RFU will announce Gazyayev's successor by next Wednesday.

Latin honours Argentina's

Football

AP, Florence

Two late goals by Walter Samuel and Andres D'Alessandro lifted Argentina to a thrilling 3-2 victory over traditional soccer rival Uruguay in a friendly match Wednesday.

Uruguay held a 2-1 lead at the Artemio Franchi stadium on goals by Diego Forlan and Martin Liguera through the closing minutes. Juan Sebastian Veron scored Argentina's first in the 45th.

A winning header by defender Samuel, who plays in Italy with AS Roma, gave Argentina the equalizer in the 86th.

D'Alessandro, who plays in Germany with Wolfsburg, netted the winning goal in the closing minute of a hard-fought match.

The match was less than friendly, with defenders of both sides landing rough tackles and the two Latin American teams engaging as hard as in a World Cup qualifier.

Forlan opened the scoring after

only four minutes with a drive from the penalty area edge that caught Argentina goalkeeper Pablo Caballero out of balance.

Veron, the newly signed star of Chelsea, tallied the equalizer with a powerful free kick from 25 meters (yards) by the end of the first half

may join Veron at Chelsea after Russian tycoon Roman Abramovich, the new owner of the English club, reportedly made a euro30 million (US\$33.4 million) bid to get the Inter Milan striker.

Uruguay started the second half on the attack and substitute Liguera made it 2-1 in the 55th, taking advantage of a defensive lapse of the Argentine team.

As Uruguay seemed heading toward a deserved victory, Samuel headed in the equalizer. A few minutes later D'Alessandro, fed by Javier Saviola, netted the winning goal.

Both D'Alessandro and Saviola had been fielded in the 61st to replace Veron and Claudio Lopez.

About 5,000 fans, most of them Latin Americans, watched the match.

Although the friendly featured two of the most popular South American teams, winners of two World Cup titles each, there were a few Italians in the stands as the Germany-Italy friendly was live on television at the same time.



ANDRES D'ALESSANDRO

after Hernan Crespo squandered two previous scoring chances. Crespo is amid rumors that he

Iceland on track,



REUTERS, London

Iceland, who have never qualified for the finals of a major tournament, stayed on course to reach next summer's European Championship when they beat the Faroe Islands 2-1 on Wednesday.

But there was no such joy for Wales, bidding to reach a major tournament finals for the first time since the 1958 World Cup.

Their run of four successive wins in Group Nine was halted when they lost 1-0 in Belgrade to Serbia & Montenegro.

The two matches were the only European qualifiers played on a night otherwise designated for friendly internationals.

Iceland's victory in Torshavn put them on top of a qualifying group for a major competition for the first time in their history.

They moved on to 12 points from six matches to lead Germany by a point at the head of the Group Five standings. Iceland and Germany meet in Reykjavik on September 6.

Eidur Gudjohnsen put Iceland in front in the fifth minute, ending a solo run into the box with a low shot into the far corner of the net.

Petur Marteinsson stumbled in the winner from close range after a corner in the 72nd minute, five minutes after Rogvi Jacobsen had pulled the home side level with a header.

Wales still lead the standings with 12 points from five matches in their group, followed by Italy (10 points from five games), and Serbia & Montenegro, who now have eight points from their six games.

The deciding goal in Belgrade came 17 minutes from time when Dragan Mladenovic got on the end of downward header after a well-taken corner kick and blasted the ball home from a goal mouth scramble to delight the passionate 30,000-strong crowd.

Wales next match is in Italy on September 6.

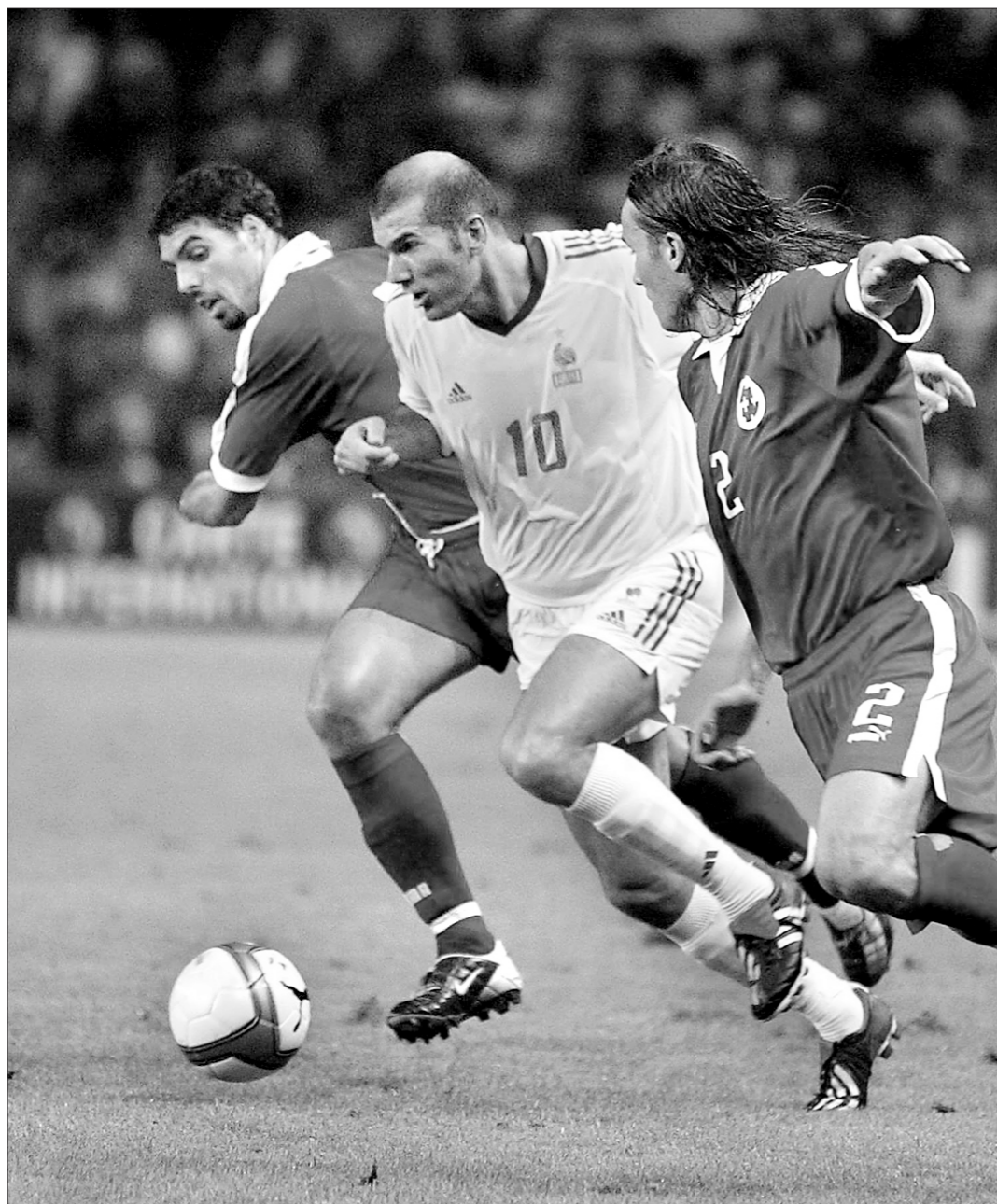


PHOTO: AFP

French maestro Zinedine Zidane (C) finds himself sandwiched between Switzerland's Remo Meyer (R) and Fabio Celestini during their friendly in Geneva on August 20.