

Euro giants almost there



AFP, Paris

England, France and Italy all took huge strides towards the Euro 2004 finals on Saturday but fellow European football superpower Germany put in such a dismal performance that coach Rudi Voller hinted he was close to quitting.

England defeated Macedonia 2-1, defending champions France crushed Cyprus 5-0 while Italy brought the Welsh bandwagon crashing to a halt with a 4-0 win.

However, Voller, who took Germany to the World Cup final last year, was as gloomy as the Reykjavik weather after his side struggled to a 0-0 draw with Iceland.

In Skopje, Wayne Rooney became the youngest player to score for England as Sven-Goran Eriksson's side came from behind to earn a 2-1 win over Macedonia that moved them to the brink of automatic qualification.

The 17-year-old Everton striker's 53rd-minute goal and a penalty from captain David Beckham cancelled out Georgi Hristov's first half opener for the home side and left England

as clear favourites to win Group Seven.

"The talent is there, the quality is there. Of course he has a lot to learn but if things go to plan, he can go very, very far," said Eriksson of Rooney.

Group rivals Turkey beat Liechtenstein 3-0 to keep the pressure on England.

Meanwhile, Voller launched an angry tirade at his players and the German media after a 0-0 draw against Iceland in Group Five.

"There was not enough from the players," fumed the coach. "On Wednesday, when we play Scotland, the only players who will take part are ones who promise me 100 percent."

Voller, who took Germany to the World Cup final last year, also hinted that he was nearing the end of his tether after three years in charge.

"I can't allow this to continue any longer... I am being dragged through the mud - it is the lowest of the low."

There were no such complaints from either French coach Jacques Santini or Italian supremo Giovanni Trapattoni.

The French thrashed Cyprus 5-0 in Paris thanks to two goals each from David Trezeguet and Sylvain Wiltord and one from Thierry Henry.

The easy win means France, the

only nation with a 100 per cent record, now need just a point in Slovenia on Wednesday to book their spot in the finals in Portugal as Group One winners.

Only the ten group winners are guaranteed a place in the finals next summer with the runners-up forced into five play-offs.

In Milan, Italy took a huge step towards the finals crushing Group Nine rivals Wales 4-0.

A stunning 11 minute second-half hat-trick by AC Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi put Italy in firm control before Alessandro Del Piero's penalty completed the rout.

The resounding victory saw Italy replace Wales at the top of the group with two matches to play.

In Glasgow, James McFadden rounded off a memorable week following his move from Motherwell to Everton by scoring the third goal in an unconvincing 3-1 Group Five victory over the Faroe Islands.

Neil McCann and Paul Dickow scored the other goals with Julian Johnsson netting for the part-timers from the Faroes.

Ireland's hopes of booking an automatic place in the finals suffered another setback when they were held to a 1-1 draw by Russia in Dublin.

Damien Duff gave them the lead

in the 36th minute, but Russian centre-back Sergei Ignashevich snatched an equaliser.

The Irish now have 11 points with just one match to play in Group 10, but leaders Switzerland already have 12 with two games to play.

"The players aren't happy with their performances," said Irish coach Brian Kerr.

"We weren't fluid and had no rhythm to our game."

Elsewhere, Romania went top of Group Two with a 4-0 defeat of Luxembourg while, in Group Three, the Czech Republic won 3-1 in Belarus to go top on goal difference from Holland who beat Austria by the same margin.

Sweden have a three-point lead at the top of Group Four after a 5-0 win against San Marino, while Greece's 1-0 win against Armenia keeps them four points ahead of Spain who were playing a friendly against Portugal.

Bulgaria have a one-point lead in Group Eight over Croatia after a 2-0 home win against Estonia but the Croats kept in contention with a 3-0 win in Andorra.

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STANDINGS

Euro 2004 qualifying tables and remaining fixtures after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Table with 2 columns: Group 1 and Group 6, listing teams and their statistics.

Table with 2 columns: Remaining fixtures for Group 1 and Group 6, listing opponents and dates.

Table with 2 columns: Group 2 and Group 7, listing teams and their statistics.

Table with 2 columns: Remaining fixtures for Group 2 and Group 7, listing opponents and dates.

Table with 2 columns: Group 3 and Group 8, listing teams and their statistics.

Table with 2 columns: Remaining fixtures for Group 3 and Group 8, listing opponents and dates.

Table with 2 columns: Group 4 and Group 9, listing teams and their statistics.

Table with 2 columns: Remaining fixtures for Group 4 and Group 9, listing opponents and dates.

Table with 2 columns: Group 5 and Group 10, listing teams and their statistics.

Table with 2 columns: Remaining fixtures for Group 5 and Group 10, listing opponents and dates.



BAD BEGINNING: Dejected Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa (L), forward Cesar Delgado (L) and goalkeeper Pablo Caballero leaving the field at the end of the match against Chile at the Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires on September 6.

Argentina off the wrong foot



REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Argentina threw away a two-goal lead in a disappointing 2-2 home draw against Chile as the South American qualifying competition for the 2006 World Cup kicked off on Saturday.

In the day's two other games, Peru came from behind to hammer Paraguay 4-1 and Ecuador started with a 2-0 home win over Venezuela as the marathon battle for four automatic berths began nearly three years before the final is due to be played.

Argentina, in particularly coach Marcelo Bielsa and midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron, have yet to win back the confidence of the public after the team's spectacular failure in Japan and South Korea, where they arrived as favourites only to crash out in the first round.

Veron was booed every time he touched the ball by the crowd in Buenos Aires, although the new Chelsea signing had a good match in midfield and was gradually winning the supporters over before he was surprisingly substituted for Matias Almeyda midway through the second half.

Chile, missing Italian-based midfielder David Pizarro and striker Marcelo Salas through injury, appeared tailor-made for the occasion.

Argentina had won their last five matches against their neighbours from across the Andes and have not lost to them for 30 years.

Cristian "Kily" Gonzalez and Pablo Aimar scored twice in four minutes to give Argentina a 2-0 first-half lead but Chile stunned the River Plate stadium when Milovan Mirosevic and Reinaldo Navia scored in the second half.

A bad-tempered ending saw Argentina's Walter Samuel and Chile's Cristian Alvarez sent off for fighting while Navia was also dismissed for a tackle from behind.

"We lost two points against inferior opponents," the beleaguered Bielsa said.

"It's difficult to explain how such a winnable match was not, in the end, won," added the introverted, eccentric coach who hails from a famous family of lawyers.

Chile coach Juvenal Olmos said: "I was satisfied with the attitude of my players and their ability to turn around an adverse scoreline in a stadium which has generally been unfavourable for Chilean football."

Chile's next game is on Tuesday at home to Peru, who got off to the perfect start against Paraguay.

Paraguay, who reached the last 16 at the last two World Cups, went ahead when Carlos Gamarra headed in Francisco Arce's outswinging corner as two of the team's stalwarts combined.

But the rest of the match suggested that Paraguay were a team who are past the prime.

Newcastle United midfielder Nolberto Solano headed Peru level after 34 minutes and eight minutes later set up the second for Club Bruges striker Andres Mendoza with a 60-metre pass out of defence.

Peru soaked up Paraguay pressure for most of the second half then struck with two more goals in the last ten minutes from locally-based Jorge Soto and Jefferson Farfan.

In Quito, already enjoying the advantage of playing at 2,800 metres above sea level, Ecuador were gifted an early goal by Venezuela, the only members of the South American Football Confederation who have never played at the World Cup.

The visiting defence stood and watched as Giovanni Espinoza nipped in to put Ecuador ahead after five minutes after a free kick was floated in from the left.

Carlos Tenorio headed home the second in the second half.

Ecuador visit defending champions Brazil, who begin their campaign in Colombia on Sunday, next Wednesday with coach Hernan Dario Gomez in confident mood.

"We're going to try and win," he said.

"Brazil is a great team but I have a great team as well. Ecuador can produce surprises."

Voller furious



AFP, Reykjavik

Furious coach Rudi Voller lashed out at his players and the country's media after Germany struggled to a 0-0 draw against Iceland here on Saturday as their Euro 2004 campaign continued to stutter.

"There was not enough from the players," fumed Voller. "On Wednesday, when we play Scotland, the only players who will take part are ones who promise me 100 percent."

Voller, who took Germany to the World Cup final last year, also hinted that he was nearing the end of his tether after three years in charge.

"I can not allow this to continue any longer - I cannot listen to this shit any more."

"I will defend myself but the fact that I am being dragged through the mud is the lowest of the low."

German captain and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn called for the "killer mentality" before the match here but the World Cup runners-up were impotent in front of goal, despite the return of playmaker Sebastian Deisler, and could even have ended

up pointless but for some stubborn defending and poor Iceland finishing.

One positive note on a night of many negatives was the comeback of Bayern Munich star Deisler who came on after 69 minutes to make his first appearance in a German shirt since May 2002.

In a four first 20 minutes, a tame header from Michael Ballack was the only noteworthy action.

On 22 minutes, Oliver Neuville had a great chance to open the scoring but the ball got stuck under his feet, summing up German confidence in front of goal, as the Iceland defence averted the danger.

The pressure on Germany winning their next match against Scotland on Wednesday in Dortmund has now increased with the returning Berti Vogts hoping his adopted nation can create an upset against his homeland.

Voller will not want the ticket to Portugal to hinge on the return match with Iceland on October 11 in Hamburg.

Iceland top Group Five with 13 points while Germany are one point adrift, having played one game less, with Scotland a further point behind after their 3-1 win over the Faroe Islands Saturday.



BORN TO FLY: Wayne Rooney (L) of England jumps over Macedonia's Vlatko Grozdanovski at the City stadium in Skopje on September 6.

Wayne's world



AFP, Skopje

Making history is getting to be a habit for Wayne Rooney and England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson is confident it is one his precociously talented teenager can continue.

After becoming the youngest ever England player, when he made his debut in a friendly defeat to Australia in February, Rooney became the youngest scorer for his country in a crucial 2-1 win over Macedonia here on Saturday.

The 17-year-old's 53rd minute equaliser was the spark for a fightback that puts England firmly in control of their own destiny in their Euro 2004 Group Seven qualifying battle with Turkey.

It also ensured that the Everton striker, who does not turn 18 until October 24, eclipsed striking partner Michael Owen as the youngest player to find the net in an England shirt.

Eriksson said Rooney's strike, and the way he adapted to a half-time tactical shift which saw him

drop into an attacking midfield role following the introduction of Emile Heskey, spoke volumes about his potential.

"The talent is there, the quality is there. Of course he has a lot to learn but if things go to plan, he can go very, very far."

Ironically, Rooney's goal was largely the result of his and Owen's failure to trouble the Macedonians during the first half here.

Having seen his side fall a goal behind, Eriksson gambled by bringing on Owen's muscular Liverpool striking partner Heskey and asking Rooney to drop into a deeper role just behind them.

"Tactically he did exactly what I asked of him," Eriksson said.

Such is the desire of both the England and Everton management to protect Rooney from the pressures of the expectations he has generated since his emergence last season that he is systematically shielded from media attention.

Despite his history-making, Saturday night was no exception with the gaggle of waiting reporters having to settle for a statement issued on behalf of the player.

In it, he said the importance of the goal for England's qualifying

prospects outweighed its personal significance.

"It was a great feeling for me to score my first England goal - even better knowing it was in such an important game," Rooney said.

"If I am being honest, then I have to say that the result is more important to me than scoring the goal because it was a vital win for us."

"It was a difficult game in difficult circumstances but once again all of the lads worked hard and showed a never say die spirit."

Rooney also paid tribute to the contribution of Heskey, who set up his goal with a headed knockdown that the Everton teenager fired home from just inside the box.

"With the goal Emile Heskey did really well for me. All I had to do was concentrate on getting a good connection onto the shot - and thankfully that's what happened."

Owen, who it is easy to forget is still only 23, was 18 years and 133 days when he scored against Morocco in 1998.

Rooney improved on that by nearly six months, opening his international account on his sixth England appearance at the age of 17 years and 317 days.

Now the two of them appear set

to lead England's attack for years to come and Rooney could be forgiven for blinking every so often and asking if it is all real.

This time last year he was a 16-year-old trainee earning 90 pounds a week.

But life for Rooney changed forever when he made the first of his significant pieces of history - becoming the youngest player ever to score in the English Premiership days before he turned 17.

A 3-1 defeat by the Socceros was not the most auspicious of starts to his England career, but he was able to flash enough of his prodigious blend of talent and confidence to convince Eriksson that this was a special talent.

The result was Rooney starting an England match for the first time in the crucial clash with Turkey in April and Eriksson's faith remains unshakeable and the Swede's judgement was vindicated once more here on Saturday.

Since that memorable night Rooney has had his fair share of troubles with injuries and loss of form but Eriksson's faith remains unshakeable and the Swede's judgement was vindicated once more here on Saturday.



Italy striker Filippo Inzaghi (L) starts celebrating after scoring his second goal against Wales as Wales goalkeeper Paul Stephen Jones looks at Milan's San Siro's stadium on September 6.

Best of friends!



AFP, Milan

Italy's hat-trick hero Filippo Inzaghi dismissed talk of a rift between him and strike partner Christian Vieri after the Azzurri's resounding 4-0 win over Wales here at the San Siro.

Inzaghi, playing in place of the injured Francesco Totti, scored three goals in 11 second-half minutes as Giovanni Trapattoni's men took a giant stride towards qualification for the 2004 European championships on Saturday.

Reports prior to the match suggested there was no love lost between the two forwards despite being room-mates on international duty, but Inzaghi said he and Vieri have never been closer.

"We share a room when we are at training camp and whenever we know we are going to play together we share an even greater rapport," said Inzaghi after the match.

"There is no envy or jealousy

between us so we work hard for each other. You could see that on the pitch. Together we caused many problems for Wales."

"I'm only sorry that I was injured last summer and couldn't play with him at the World Cup."

Inzaghi said his quick-fire treble was the highlight of his international career so far.

"It was an incredible night, one I will never forget," said the AC Milan marksman. "Not only was it my first hat-trick for Italy but Vieri and I combined well throughout the whole game."

Italy took 59 minutes to break down Welsh resistance with Inzaghi following up to rattle home the rebound after Vieri's header had struck the woodwork.

Inzaghi doubled his tally four minutes later, striking Massimo Oddo's pinpoint cross on the half-volley wide of Wales goalkeeper Paul Jones.

Italy coach Trapattoni admitted he was beginning to feel anxious before Inzaghi broke the deadlock.

"I think somebody must have brought a black cat into the stadium," he said after his side were twice denied by the woodwork either side of half-time.

"We created so many chances but Wales were hanging on and I thought that maybe it was going to be one of those nights."

"Then we got the goal and that allowed us to play with less tension and in the end we won comfortably."

Revenge for their 2-1 defeat in Cardiff last October, Italy's impressive victory took them top of Group Nine with two matches left to play.

Italy have 13 points from six matches, one more than Wales and four ahead of third-placed Finland.

Italy now face a tough match away to Serbia and Montenegro on Wednesday which could see them qualify for Portugal next summer, depending on the outcome of Wales' match at home to Finland the same night.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated results in Euro 2004 qualifying matches on Saturday:

Group 1: At Ljubljana: Slovenia 3 (Sijjak 35, Knavs 37, Coh 78) Israel 1 (Revivo 69) At Paris: France 5 (Trezeguet 8, 82, Wiltord 20, 41, Henry 60) Cyprus 0

Group 2: At Ploiesti, Romania: Romania 4 (Mutu 39, Pancu 42, Ganea 43, Bratu 77) Luxembourg 0

Group 3: At Minsk: Belarus 1 (Bulyga 14) Czech Republic 3 (Nedved 37, Baros 54, Smicer 85) At Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Holland 3 (Van der Vaart 30, Kluijver 60, Cocu 64) Austria 1 (Fogatz 34)

Group 4: At Gothenburg, Sweden: Sweden 5 (Johnsson 33, Jakobsson 49, Ibrahimovic 56, 83-pen, Kaliström 68-pen) San Marino 0

At Riga: Latvia 0 Poland 2 (Szymkowiak 36, Klos 39)

Group 5: At Glasgow: Scotland 3 (McCann 8, Dickov 45, McFadden 74) Faroe Islands 1 (Johnsson 36)

At Reykjavik: Iceland 0 Germany 0

Group 6: At Yerevan: Armenia 0 Greece 2 (Vryzas 34) At Donetsk, Ukraine: Ukraine 0 Northern Ireland 0

Group 7: At Skopje: Macedonia 1 (Hristov 27) England 2 (Rooney 53, Beckham 63-pen)

At Vaduz: Liechtenstein 0 Turkey 3 (Metin 14, Buruk 41, Hakan Sukur 50)

Group 8: At Andorra: Andorra 0 Croatia 3 (Kovacs 4, Simunic 17, Rosso 71)

At Sofia: Bulgaria 2 (Petrov 16, Berbatov 68) Estonia 0

Group 9: At Baku: Azerbaijan 1 (Ismailov 86) Finland 2 (Tainio 52, Nurmela 74)

At Milan: Italy 4 (Inzaghi 59, 63, 70, Del Piero 76-pen) Wales 0

Group 10: At Dublin: Republic of Ireland 1 (Duff 35) Russia 1 (Ignashevich 42) At Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgia 3 (Sh. Arveladze 9, 42, Ashvetia 17) Albania 0