

Time to set pulses racing



AFP, Frankfurt

More than 900 days before the first ball is kicked at the 2006 World Cup finals teams from Europe to Oceania will on Friday learn who they must overcome to win a place in Germany.

The draw for the preliminary stages of the World Cup in the Frankfurt Festhalle comes hot on the heels of the draw for the finals of Euro 2004 and represents the first real chance for the German organisers to show that preparations are running like clockwork.

"Time has passed quickly, but we have worked just as quickly," Franz Beckenbauer, the president of the organising committee, said this week.

"We still have to find two national sponsors out of the 21 planned, but there are absolutely no financial problems."

Beckenbauer promised a

spectacular, star-studded ceremony which will be televised in more than 100 countries and the 1990 World Cup-winning coach confidently predicted the draw would set the first of many television audience records in this World Cup. Six-time Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher, a fan of German club Cologne, will help draw the balls for the European nations alongside the world's best referee Pierluigi Collina.

Asian, African, North and Central American and Caribbean, Oceania and European confederations will enter the draw.

South American nations began their World Cup qualifiers in September in a single league format.

Only Germany, as host nation, are automatically qualified. Brazil, as reigning champions, have not been given direct entry to the finals following a rule change by world football's governing body FIFA and are having to qualify.

A total of 197 national associations plus New Caledonia entered the preliminary competition for the 2006 World Cup, but that number has been reduced already by playoffs in Asia and Africa.

Thirty African nations will be split into five groups according to their seedings.



Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo (R) jumps over Atletico Madrid's Argentine Diego Simeone at Madrid on December 3.

Primera Liga Ronaldo, Raul revel

Football

AFP, Madrid

Ronaldo notched up one of the fastest goals in Spanish football history to set Real Madrid on their way to a 2-0 victory over local rivals Atletico Madrid, and also to the top of the Spanish first division, on Wednesday.

The Brazilian World Cup winner picked up the ball straight from the kick off and then ran 30 metres past the watching Atletico defender before putting the ball past goalkeeper Mono Burgos.

Only 16 seconds had elapsed after the referee had blown his whistle to start the game before Ronaldo got his 11th goal of the season, the quickest since Osasuna's Mariano Armentano scored after just 13 seconds on October 22, 2001.

Real skipper Raul Gonzalez added the second for the hosts after 20 minutes, getting on the end of a stunning cross from England captain David Beckham.

However, Atletico had pride at stake in the local derby and their heads never dropped in a thrilling game when they were only thwarted from getting goals by the heroics of Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

The win put Real two points clear at the top Spanish first division after their nearest rivals Valencia and Deportivo La Coruna could only draw.

The reigning Spanish champions now have 30 points from their 14 games while Valencia lie second with 28 points following their 0-0 draw at Real Sociedad on Tuesday.

Deportivo La Coruna lie third, one point further adrift, after a dull 1-

1 draw at Valladolid on Wednesday.

The Galicians went ahead after 50 minutes when Valladolid defender Jonathan Martin put the ball in his own net, but the home side equalised 15 minutes later with a header from Oscar Garcia.

Real can consolidate their lead with a win over their eternal rivals Barcelona on Saturday, and the Catalans will need to rebuild their confidence after they crashed 5-1 at Malaga on Wednesday, their worst league defeat for nine seasons.

The catastrophe for the Catalans started early with Malaga striker Salva Ballesta finishing off a counter-attack after nine minutes, sending the ball through the legs of the hapless Barca goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

Valdes was again at fault five minutes later, being hopelessly out of position and allowing Salva an easy header from a Vicente Valcarce cross.

Salva got his hat-trick after 69 minutes, and his club's third goal, sending a long-range thunderbolt past the Spanish under-21 keeper, which at least this time he could not be blamed for failing to collect.

Diego Alonso added to Barca's misery shortly afterwards, getting Malaga's fourth with a superb shot after their Portuguese defender Litos had darted down the left wing to provide the service.

Barcelona got a consolation strike 12 minutes from the whistle but even then it was not their own strikers who found the net, with Malaga defender Fernando Sanz clumsily putting the ball in his own goal.

Manuel Canabal completed the rout four minutes from the whistle for the Andalusian club's best win since they returned to the top flight of Spanish football in the summer of 1999.

It was a bad night for clubs from Spain's second city as bottom club Espanyol went down 1-0 at home to Osasuna.

Cameroon striker Pierre Webo got the only goal of the game, leaving Espanyol defender Alberto Lopo for dead before blasting the ball past goalkeeper Toni Jimenez.

Lopo also had an early end to his sorry night after being sent off two minutes later for a rash challenge, his third red card of the season.

Murcia, one place above Espanyol, fared better although they left it late to secure a vital away point in a 1-1 draw at erratic Real Betis.

Luis Garcia equalised for Murcia from the penalty spot two minutes into injury time after Betis defender David Rivas had brought down Juanma Valero.

Betis had earlier taken the lead through Ismael Lopez two minutes after the break, with both sides having just 10 men on the field.

Murcia defender Mikel Roteta was shown a red card just two minutes into the game for a wild challenge on Dani Martin while Betis' Luis Fernandez joined him in the dressing rooms after getting his second yellow card a few seconds into the second half.

TOP SIX

Spanish football league table after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Real	14	9	3	2	29	15	30
Valencia	14	8	4	2	27	11	28
Deportivo	14	8	3	3	22	11	27
Osasuna	14	6	5	3	15	10	23
Atletico	14	7	1	6	17	18	22
Santander	13	6	2	5	18	15	20

Giggs faces UEFA music

AFP, Nyon

Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs faced a UEFA hearing Thursday which could lead to him missing the start of Wales' 2006 World Cup qualifying campaign.

Giggs was accused of elbowing Russia defender Vadim Evseev during the Euro 2004 play-off match in Moscow last month.

His case will be heard by UEFA's Control and Disciplinary Body at the organisation's headquarters but the verdict was not expected to be made public before Friday.

A ban would rob Wales of Giggs for the start of the World Cup qualifiers in September. Wales find out their opponents in qualifying at Friday's draw in Frankfurt.

The Russian Football Union rushed a video of the alleged elbow to UEFA in an unsuccessful attempt to have Giggs banned for the second leg in Cardiff which they won with a goal from Evseev to qualify for the finals next June in Portugal.

The Football Association of Wales claim Giggs was provoked by Evseev before he swung his elbow, which appeared to make minimal contact with the Russian.

The Russians have since withdrawn their complaint, but UEFA are still to hear the case.

Earlier this week, Giggs was fined 7,500 pounds by the Football Association for his part in the fracas after the Premiership game against Arsenal at Old Trafford on September 21.

Wanting Viduka

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson was reported Thursday to have made Leeds United striker Mark Viduka his main target when the transfer window opens in January.

Newspapers said Ferguson was ready to make an official five million pound (8.6 million dollar) offer for the Australian on January 1. He would be the most controversial signing Ferguson has made since French star Eric Cantona joined from Leeds a decade ago.

The Aussie's reputation as an awkward customer will not scare off Ferguson who took Cantona under his wing and also tried to sign maverick Italian Paolo Di Canio several times.

United, who are so short of strikers that they paired Brazilian midfielder Kleberson with French winger David Bellion up front in Wednesday night's 2-0 League Cup defeat at West Brom, are worried that Ruud van Nistelrooy is finding the load as the lone striker hard to cope with.

Uruguayan Diego Forlan -- despite his recent goal spree -- is still seen as a squad man.

Viduka would bring more options to the United manager's selections and he comes with the added bonus that he can play in the Champions League. United have already made contact with Leeds whose financial problems could pave the way for Viduka to join United.

League Cup Liverpool, MU crash out

Football

AFP, London

Gerard Houllier's patience with his under-performing Liverpool stars finally snapped after his side was dumped out of the League Cup by Bolton.

A last-minute penalty from Youri Djorkaeff gave Bolton victory in a five-goal thriller and Houllier could not contain his anger over the basic errors which cost his side the chance to defend the only piece of silverware they won last season.

"We let the fans and the club down and there is no excuse. We didn't deserve to go through and we let ourselves down," Houllier fumed.

"I'm angry with my players and I'm not happy with the performance. We wasted chances, made basic errors and shot ourselves in the foot after equalising then conceding more goals.

"The passing was not good enough, and credit to Bolton, they took their chances. The game was there to be won and we didn't take it. I'm so angry and the players will know that when we come in tomorrow."

Liverpool were joined on the scrapheap by last year's beaten finalists Manchester United.

But Sir Alex Ferguson at least had the excuse of having fielded a second string side in the 2-0 defeat by First Division leaders West Bromwich Albion.

A spectacular 6th-minute scissor-kick volley from Swiss wing-back Bernt Haas and a well-placed header from Scott Dobie, 46 seconds after he came

off the bench ten minutes into the second half, made sure of West Brom's place in the draw for the quarter-finals.

The Baggies could have won even more convincingly but for a superb first half penalty stop by United's number two goalkeeper Roy Carroll from Jason Koumas.

"You're always in the game at 1-0 down but the second goal -- with the experience West Brom have got -- meant it would have been difficult to beat them after that," Ferguson acknowledged.

Despite the defeat, the United boss said an accomplished first start by youngster Phil Bardley at right-back represented a major bright spot.

"He was outstanding tonight and that was a major plus for us."

There was no slip-up by Premiership leaders Chelsea, who negotiated their way past first division Reading thanks to a solitary 57th minute strike from Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink.

Liverpool were always on the back foot against a fired-up Bolton.

Brazilian striker Mario Jardel gave the visitors the lead after four minutes. Danny Murphy equalised mid-way through the second half but Jay-Jay Okocha restored Bolton's lead with a trademark freekick in the 79th minute.

The tie seemed destined for extra time when Vladimir Smicer equalised again for Liverpool two minutes from time.

But Bolton were able to claim a deserved victory when Salif Diou appended Kevin Davies and the unpended Djorkaeff con-

verted the late penalty.

Aston Villa, five times winners of the trophy, eased into the last eight with an ultimately comfortable 3-0 win over first division Crystal Palace.

An own goal by Kit Symons on the back foot and second half strikes from Gavin McCann (70) and Juan Pablo Angel (79) completed Villa's win.

Tottenham fans had double cause for celebration after a 3-1 win over Manchester City at White Hart Lane.

Darren Anderton put the home side ahead after nine minutes before Portuguese misfit Helder Postiga finally opened his Spurs account after half an hour.

Robbie Fowler gave City hope ten minutes from the end but Frederic Kanoute, who had missed Spurs previous six matches with an ankle injury, came off the bench to stroke home a third for the home side in the final minute.

Australian goalkeeper was Middlesbrough's hero in a penalty shoot-out victory over Everton at the Riverside.

Schwarzer saved Everton's third penalty, from Leon Osman, to send his side through 5-4 after two hours of action had failed to produce a goal.

LEAGUE CUP DRAW

English League Cup quarterfinal draw:

Bolton v Southampton
Aston Villa v Chelsea
West Brom v Arsenal
Tottenham v Middlesbrough

* Ties to be played week starting December 15

Italian Cup Last eight within Milan's grasp

AFP, Rome

Holders AC Milan are well-placed to clinch a place in the quarterfinals of the Italian Cup after defeating Serie A rivals Sampdoria 1-0 in their second round, first leg tie in Genoa on Wednesday.

An own goal by Mirko Conte 11 minutes from time gave Milan a slender away win and sets them up nicely for the second leg at the San Siro in a fortnight.

Sampdoria were holding their own against the European champions until Conte inadvertently turned Christian Brocchi's low cross into his own net.

In the day's early action, Lazio put their recent poor league form behind them to close in on a place in the last eight.

A 2-0 win over Modena in their first leg encounter puts Roberto Mancini's men on the brink of the next round and banished the memory of their embarrassing 3-0 league defeat at Siena on Saturday -- their fourth loss in Serie A after 11 matches played.

Simone Inzaghi gave the visitors a 42nd minute lead, cleverly springing the offside trap and cutting in from the right before stroking the ball home.

And the recently recalled Italy international turned provider for Lazio's second goal, heading into the path of striker partner Roberto Muzzi whose rising half-volley gave Modena goalkeeper Adriano Zancoppe no chance.

Elsewhere, Parma took a big step towards the quarter-finals after overcoming second division Venezia 2-0 in Venice.

Alessandro Rosina put the visitors ahead eight minutes after half-time with a rasping volley before Gaetano Grieco wrapped up a comfortable first leg victory with a 71st minute penalty.

Bologna's poor form continued as they went down 1-0 at home to Udinese in front of a paltry 1,000 crowd. The visitors took a narrow advantage into the second leg thanks to a late goal from substitute Marek Jankulovski.

The 26-year-old Czech international collected Gianpiero Pinzi's through-ball and tucked it past Austrian goalkeeper Alex Manninger nine minutes from time.

Bologna have won just once in the league this season and are fourth from bottom of Serie A after 11 matches played.

Ligue 1 PSG move up

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain fought back to beat Strasbourg 3-2 here on Wednesday to shoot into the French league top three and end a recent goal drought and poor performances at home.

The only PSG player to score in their last five matches, Fabrice Fioresse who netted twice in that time, was suspended but Branko Boskovic, Reinaldo and Pauleta earned PSG their Parc des Princes win to help them forget uninspiring performances in front of their fans including a 0-0 draw with Nice and a 1-0 defeat by Lens in recent weeks.

An Arabian white knight

Football

AFP, Dubai

Sheikh Abdul Rahman Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa might not be a household name for soccer fans but he could be the white knight who rescues Leeds United from extinction.

The club, with a 78 million pound (135 million dollar) albatross round its neck, is on the brink of becoming the first English Premier League outfit to go into administration.

Sheikh Abdul Rahman, who used to go to Elland Road to watch Leeds' matches when he was a student in Yorkshire in the 1970s, is trying to broker a deal with a Middle Eastern consortium to save the club.

"I'm one of Leeds' biggest fans," says the 44-year-old who is a member of Bahrain's royal family, although not one of the ruling inner circle.

"They're one of the top five in English football which I love."

Sheikh Abdul Rahman, head of the Al-Najma sports club who are Bahrain

champions at volleyball and handball, has three children aged 6 to 15.

He made his money in real estate and is said to have wide-ranging business interests but reveals few personal details.

"I lived in England from 1972 to 1984 where I went to a Wellington school and then to Ealing university where I read economics," added the sheikh whose brother, Muhammad Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa, is Bahrain's foreign minister.

"I've got my health and the friendship of others to support me," he says when asked if he has the financial muscle to take over Leeds.

"I'll be a stakeholder... with a group of investors whose names I cannot reveal until the deal is agreed in the next few days."

Many of those who doubted him will have been heartened by the fact that he has appointed a respected stockbroker in Brevin Dolphin to carry out negotiations.

He says he has also strong links with Leeds chairman John McKenzie and vice-chairman Allan Leighton.

The Sheikh's declaration of intent

German Cup Hertha blown apart

Football

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen warmed up for Saturday's clash with Bayern Munich in fine style crushing Hertha Berlin 6-1 to move into the quarterfinals of the German Cup.

Holders Bayern were also victorious easing to a 3-0 win over SV Hamburg.

A first half brace from Ivan Klasnic

and further strike from French playmaker Johan Micoud saw Bremen head into the interval three goals to the good.

Hertha lost 3-0 to Bremen on the opening day of the season but it was to be much worse this time around as Valerien Ismael (47), Brazilian striker Ailton (78) and Angelos Charisteas (84) completed the rout.

Bayern, missing midfielder Michael Ballack, looked toothless in the early exchanges and it took a woeful stray pass from Christian Rahn to allow Claudio Pizarro to race

clear and open the floodgates after 28 minutes.

A lowly 10,000 crowd at the Olympic Stadium were handed more of an open spectacle in the second half with Dutchman Roy Makaay doubling the hosts' lead 120 seconds after the interval.

Hasan Salihamidzic then sealed the win with a strike late on.

SC Freiburg crashed 1-0 to minnows VfB Lubeck while Cologne lost on penalties to Greuther Furth leaving just three Bundesliga teams in the hat for the quarterfinal draw.



Bolton Wanderers' Mario Jardel (not in picture) scores against Liverpool in the English League Cup on December 3.