



USA players Claudio Reyna, Brian Ching and Eddie Pope are seen before the start of a team training session at Norderstedt on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

T & T prove they belong

REUTERS, Welsendorf

Trinidad & Tobago, the smallest nation ever to compete in a World Cup, have proven why they qualified for the biggest spectacle in world soccer.

With two gutsy performances in their Group B matches against Sweden and England so far, the islanders showed they deservedly booked a place among the 32 best footballing nations on the planet.

While Thursday's 2-0 loss to powerhouse England may have seriously dented their chances for a second round spot, Trinidad can take pride in their performance as it took only two last-gasp goals for the English to beat them.

Sweden had only managed to draw 0-0 against Trinidad in their group opener.

A motley crew of players mainly from smaller English leagues, the Scottish premier league and the weak domestic championship, managed to overcome a seemingly endless three tough rounds of qualifications and a playoff thriller against Bahrain to earn a berth in the tournament.

But their veteran Dutch coach Leo Beenhakker, who made his debut on the bench of the island nation only 13 months ago, has managed to bring the best out of them.

They showed it when they kept England at bay for 83 minutes, hoping to snatch a second point, before towering striker Peter Crouch rose to meet a cross from Beckham and score. Steven Gerrard added a second in stoppage time.

"We were well prepared for this," said keeper Shaka Hislop. "We had worked hard on our plans and it was down to our preparation rather than England's predictability."

Beenhakker, who in the past has coached Real Madrid as well as the Dutch national side at the 1990 World Cup, knew what he was going to face in Germany. "We don't expect miracles," he had said before the tournament.

But given his side's performances so far and their outside chance for qualification going into the third match of the group, a small miracle must have happened somewhere.

Only few would have expected the Caribbean nation of 1.1 million to still be in the running, albeit with a combination of results, to snatch second spot from Sweden.

"In football the gap between small and big countries has changed," defender Brent Sancho said. "We were a bit unfortunate not to get away with the draw but that is football and there is nothing you can do."

"Now we are left with a small chance and who knows, football is strange," he said.

Owen won't mind

INTERNET, undated

Michael Owen has accepted that he may be dropped for England's next match against Sweden.

The Newcastle has started the tournament slowly, and with Peter Crouch having netted the winner against Trinidad & Tobago, and Wayne Rooney now fit, it remains to be seen whether he will start the Group B decider against Sweden.

But he told BBC Radio Five Live: "I'm not worried. If I'm sat on the bench, I'm sat on the bench. I've been on the bench in my career before."

"If the manager thinks it is the right thing, he'll do it. That's football."

He added: "We've got 23 players and I'll be on the bench then so be it."

Focus on Ecuador



AFP, Berlin

Jürgen Klinsmann refused to be drawn on Germany's potential opponents in the last 16 of the World Cup, saying topping the group with a win over Ecuador was the priority.

Germany face potential matchups against England or Sweden in the knockout stage but Klinsmann wants a third successive win on Tuesday in Berlin to top Group A.

Ecuador have also qualified for the second round and a draw against Germany would see them finish as group winners.

"I am not thinking of who we can meet in the last 16. You have to look forward but there is no point in looking too far ahead," Klinsmann said at a press conference on Friday.

"We are concentrating on Ecuador now. We are glad to have qualified with one game to spare but we want to qualify as group winners with a win over Ecuador."

"It is the first game in Berlin and we want to give the fans in the capital something to celebrate."

Ecuador coach Luis Suarez said he may rest players for the Germany game but Klinsmann vowed to field his strongest team.

Captain Michael Ballack has been pencilled in to play despite running the risk of suspension after collecting a yellow card in Wednesday's 1-0 win over Poland.

"We will take the Ecuador game seriously. We want to keep our rhythm going and Michael Ballack will play," Klinsmann revealed.

"He gives the defence stability and offers an attacking threat. We were much more compact against Poland and Ballack had a large part in that."

Klinsmann admits he was impressed by Ecuador and believes they are a better team than many people give them credit for.

"Ecuador are the third best team in South America behind Brazil and Argentina, I think they are showing that here," said the former Bayern Munich striker.

"People said they could only win at altitude in Quito but they have proved that is not the case."

"We watched their two games at the finals and also kept tabs on them before the tournament. We are going to analyse all of the Ecuador players again."

Germany's players have been afforded a day off to relax and

switch off from the World Cup but Klinsmann has no fears that they will be dancing the night away in one of Berlin's countless nightclubs.

"I know the players will not be hanging around Berlin discos at two in the morning," Klinsmann said.

"They know what they want and you can see that in training."

"High tempo" is a term Klinsmann loves to use and the Euro 96 victor revealed the German players had been putting in gruelling training sessions to ensure they could compete with the other physical sides in the tournament.

"I think there are other fit teams in this tournament. Sweden had an unbelievable tempo against Paraguay and the Argentina-Ivory Coast game was very fast-paced," he admitted.

"We want to be able to play at a high tempo and keep up with our opponents. To play at this level you need to have this fitness and it is something we have put a lot of emphasis on."

It has paid dividends with Germany scoring in the 87th minute against Costa Rica in their 4-2 victory and in the second minute of stoppage time in the win over Poland.

Spain genuine contenders



REUTERS, Kamen

Spain striker David Villa said the 4-0 demolition of Ukraine in their opening match has proved they are serious contenders to win the World Cup.

"There were people who doubted our ability and we were all very keen to show that Spain has a great team and can aspire to everything," the Valencia player told his club's Web site on Friday.

"We were always confident in our ability, we knew what we could do and we will prove that we can do it again."

Villa, the top-scoring Spaniard in the Primera Liga last season with 25 goals, struck twice against Ukraine and has scored four times in nine appearances for Spain.

The 24-year-old, who Valencia bought out of his contract at Real Zaragoza for 12 million euros (\$15.2 million) last year, said he was always confident he could produce the goods.

"I knew I'd be able to hold my head up high and perform well and with a bit of luck everything would work out well," he said.

"I might even have scored more goals if I had stayed on the pitch, but the boss wanted to take me off and keep me fresh for the upcoming games and that is also a source of pride to me."

"I'm very happy because they were some of the most important goals of my career, but I hope that there are even more important things still to come."

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard said Spain's demolition of Ukraine was no surprise given the quality of their players.

"If you look at the talent of the team, then the result isn't that surprising because Spain have got some very skilful players," the Dutchman told Barca's Web site on Friday.

"The truth is that after the first half it looked as though there was only one team on the pitch. That

means that they worked very well together and that is important because it will give the team more confidence and self-esteem."

However, Villa said there was no danger of Spain getting carried away after their comprehensive opening victory.

"When people ring me from Spain they say the fans have gone mad and are delighted with the way we played... But we don't want to get drawn into the euphoria. We know that we have to keep our feet on the ground."

After a day off the players return to training on Friday to prepare for their second match in group H against Tunisia in Stuttgart on Monday. They meet Saudi Arabia four days later.



Swedish midfielder Freddie Ljungberg celebrates after scoring the match winner against Paraguay at the Berlin Olympic Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldinho targets triple crown

AFP, Konigstein

Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho dreamt at the start of the season that he would win three titles and he believes it's his destiny to make the World Cup the final leg of his personal triple crown.

Having wrapped up the Spanish league as well as the Champions League title with Barcelona, 26-year-old Ronaldinho is now determined to ensure Brazil's successful World Cup defence.

"At the start of the season, it was the greatest challenge to win all the tournaments in which I was taking part," said Ronaldinho, who was named world and European player of the year for 2005.

"It was something I dreamt about and now it's all going well. After a great year, this would be the perfect way to end the season."

Brazil got their campaign off to a winning start with a 1-0 win over Croatia although, like many teams here, they looked a long way from the finished article.

"We started well with three points," said Ronaldinho, who made his debut for the 'auriverde' in 1999.

"The aim is to get stronger game by game and reach our peak by the final. I didn't start too badly. We had a good rhythm against Croatia but there are things which can be improved."

"We need to close down spaces and, in attack, push more and do more one-two when we approach goal. That's our intention."

Part of that attacking plan is supposed to centre around Ronaldo who has been dogged by fitness and health problems and was substituted in the second-half against Croatia.

But Ronaldinho has backed his teammate to recover and show his class in the next Group F game against Australia in Munich on Sunday.

"He's a quality player. We have confidence in him and we are certain that he'll do all he can do to help us beat Australia."

Ronaldinho also hit back at those who believe that his style is more restricted when he plays with the national team compared to his free-roaming role with the Spanish champions.

"Brazil is a team of 11 players at a super high level and I do my best for my teammates to help them be the best scorers in the tournament."

English tactics predictable

REUTERS, Nuremberg

Trinidad & Tobago coach Leo Beenhakker swallowed his disappointment in eloquent style on Thursday by giving England free advice on how to succeed at the World Cup.

England hit two goals in the last seven minutes to beat Trinidad 2-0 in Group B but their performance was laboured, unimaginative and littered with mistakes and missed chances.

Until the second-half arrival of substitutes Wayne Rooney, Aaron Lennon and Stewart Downing, the 1966 winners relied on clumsy long passes that were dealt with easily by a strong Trinidad defence.

"That is what we wanted and expected," said Beenhakker, who previously managed Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Real Madrid and Ajax Amsterdam.

'Fredrik The Great'

REUTERS, Stockholm

Pictures of an ecstatic Freddie Ljungberg dominated Friday's front pages of Swedish newspapers after he scored the winning goal in Sweden's World Cup 1-0 Group B victory over Paraguay on Thursday.

With a banner headline of "Thanks Freddie" and "Fredrik The Great", tabloid Aftonbladet lauded the midfielder whose last-minute header left Sweden close to the second round and eased much anguish after they drew 0-0 with Trinidad & Tobago.

The headlines of newspapers Svenska Dagbladet and Expressen both read "Finally" in celebration of the fact that Sweden, who had only scored two goals in six matches going into the game, had improved their scoring record.

Daily Dagens Nyheter's front page sported the headline "Lovely Ljungberg" while its sports section focused on the nerve-wracking wait for Sweden to score in the key game, carrying the headline "Good Lord".

"I want to kiss his (Ljungberg's) feet which never stop and his forehead which was there as the angst was bringing down the entire nation in cramps of anguish," the newspaper's columnist Johan Esk wrote.

Sweden could still be knocked out of the tournament on goal difference if they heavily lose their last game with England on Tuesday and Trinidad & Tobago beat Paraguay on the same day.

Tin to Gold



AFP, Hamburg

From the Andes via an unglamorous southern English port to headline-maker at the World Cup might be one of the more circuitous routes to stardom in the tournament's recent history.

But it will do very nicely for Ecuador's Agustín Delgado, otherwise known as 'Tin'.

A place in the second phase of a World Cup looked a distant pipe-dream for the veteran from El Juncal who, after travels taking him from his homeland to Mexico via an injury-ridden spell in the English Premiership with Southampton and back again, is now turning out in the unheralded Liga de Quito.

Here, however, brilliant finishing against Poland and Costa Rica have helped Luis Suarez's men into the last 16 ahead of time with a match against Germany to come.

Fans had better make the most of their man as 'El Tin' said afterwards that "I will retire from the national side after the World Cup. We have a number of youngsters coming along and the national team makes a lot of demands on you."

A draw against the hosts would see the Latin American minnows,

previously dubbed as only a threat at high altitude, win Group A - not bad for a side who crashed out in the opening phase four years ago, their only previous visit to the finals.

"I think we can win that game and win the group," Delgado said of Tuesday's encounter in Berlin, knowing that would condemn the Germans to runners-up spot and a potentially trickier last 16 rival.

"It is going to be a really great game against Germany because we have both already qualified," added the 31-year-old for whom the cliché 'has had more clubs than Jack Nicklaus' could have been invented, at least in a Latin American context.

His goals here in two stirring wins have had them dancing in the streets back home, and the celebrations have reverberated as far as Spain, where in recent years hundreds of thousands of his compatriots have been making their new livelihoods to help out struggling families back home.

Born in Imbabura province two days before Christmas in 1974, Agustín Javier Delgado Chala cut his footballing teeth with Barcelona SC Guayaquil, for whom he was active between 1992 and 1996.

During that time he made an inauspicious international debut in a 2-0 loss to neighbours Peru, but he stuck at his task and was on target in the 2002 finals in a loss to

Mexico in Japan which ultimately meant an early flight home.

That won't happen this time with Suarez's side yet to concede a goal and mimicking Brazil with flowing moves and incisive passing when it comes to going forward.

Five goals in 11 qualifiers from Delgado helped the side come third in the Latin American qualifiers behind the Brazilians and Argentina.

By the start of that campaign, Delgado, who has a rebellious streak, had swanned in and out of Independiente Medellín (1996-97), El Nacional Quito (1997) and Barcelona SC Guayaquil (1997-1999), where he would return in 2005 after further moves to Cruz Azul and Necaxa in Mexico, as well as Southampton.

At the Dell between 2001 and 2004 he found his time blighted by knee and back problems and after barely a dozen games he eventually returned home, first to Aucas, then Pumas in Mexico and then Barcelona - not to be confused with the Spanish, or rather Catalan, version.

Earlier this year he joined Liga de Quito seeking to add to Ecuadorean title wins in 1996 and 1997 and Mexican equivalents in 2001 and 2004.

Now he goes up against the Germans, who after his performances over the past week will be only too aware of his towering aerial threat.



THE ENGLISH WALL: England centre-back John Terry (L) makes a spectacular goalline save in their Group B match against Trinidad and Tobago at Nuremberg's Franken Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Best yet to come!



AGENCIES, Nuremberg

David Beckham admits England have yet to play at their best, but said getting three points against Trinidad and Tobago was what mattered most.

England squeezed past the admirable Trinidadians 2-0 but had to wait until the 83rd minute to find the back of the net and calm nerves on the England bench.

They had Peter Crouch and Steven Gerrard to thank for victory, and Beckham said credit must also go to the Caribbean minnows who fought like warriors.

"We knew it would be a hard game and that they would get 11 men behind the ball," said Beckham, who ended the match in the unfamiliar position of right back.

"They made it hard for us all the game but we knew that if we stuck to our game plan then we'd break them down."

While England were less than convincing in the first half and could have gone behind, they perked up when Wayne Rooney and teenager Aaron Lennon came

on as a substitute for Michael Owen and Jamie Carragher respectively with 30 minutes remaining.

England have struggled getting goals in the second period in recent matches and Beckham took their second half performance, sparked by Rooney, as the most encouraging aspect of the game.

"The good thing about the game is that we finished strongly," he said.

"There is always a slight tension when you expect to win so much but we stuck at our task, we worked hard."

"We got goals in the second half which we haven't done for a while."

Despite the 2-0 scoreline, England were not at their best and Beckham admits that there is better to come.

"It would be very fair to say that you haven't seen the best of us yet but we hope we have now put ourselves in a good position," he said.

"We know we can get better and we just have to show people."

However, there's still cause for concern as England prepared for their final Group B game against Sweden on Tuesday in Cologne - principally in attack.

On Thursday's evidence, all of England's regular goalscorers are either lacking form, fitness or

both. Michael Owen is the principal worry, getting substituted early in the second half of both England's games and looking dangerous in neither.

Sidelined after a foot injury on December 31, the fact that he has played only once for Newcastle United this year is reflected in a real lack of sharpness in front of goal - despite plenty of promising signs in training.

Though his record for England brooks no argument, with 36 goals in 79 games, England need him to find his true form if they are to go all the way to Berlin on July 9.

The usually-dependable Frank Lampard, who top-scored for champions Chelsea last season with 20 goals and hit three at Euro 2004, missed a hatful of chances.

Lampard had scored 10 times in his previous 22 England games before the tournament and Eriksson will certainly hope his finishing against the Soca Warriors was just a blip.

Crouch, though he scored the vital goal, had been disappointing for the preceding 82 minutes; his low point being a mis-directed volley from a David Beckham cross that was worthy of any Sunday league pub team.

Rooney, whose injury soap-opera is at last drawing to a close, is, of course, a special case.