

USA move into top 20

Brazil widen the gap

ZURICH, Aug 18 (Reuters): Brazil strengthened their hold at the top of the FIFA world rankings announced today and the United States moved into the top 20.

By reaching the finals of the Confederations' Cup, Brazil opened up an 87-point lead over World Cup winners France.

The US was the biggest mover among the top 100 nations jumping 10 places from 30 to 20.

Ranking, last month's ranking points:

1. (1) Brazil	842
2. (2) France	755
3. (3) Czech Republic	753
4. (4) Italy	720
5. (5) Germany	718
6. (6) Argentina	715
7. (8) Spain	713
8. (6) Croatia	712
9. (11) Mexico	709
10. (9) Romania	694
11. (10) Norway	689
12. (12) Portugal	679
13. (13) Netherlands	669
14. (14) England	665
15. (15) Sweden	664
16. (16) Paraguay	647
17. (17) Denmark	627
18. (18) Colombia	625
19. (19) Morocco	623
20. (20) Austria	623
21. (30) US	623
22. (21) Yugoslavia	620
23. (22) Chile	618
24. (23) Slovakia	612
25. (24) Ukraine	610
26. (25) Israel	609
27. (26) Poland	606
28. (27) Russia	598
29. (28) Tunisia	594
30. (29) South Africa	593

Silver screen beckons Wright

LONDON, Aug 18: Former England striker Ian Wright plans to retire from football at the end of the season to become a film star, reports Reuters.

The 35-year-old showman, who scored 128 goals from 212 games in a seven-year stint at Arsenal, earning 33 England caps, told The Sun newspaper in an interview published today he wanted to go out at the top with his current club West Ham.

Wright, who already has a successful television career as the presenter of a weekend chat show, said the risk of injury and a desire to be remembered at his best were the main factors in his decision to quit.

"Can you imagine the stick I'd get if I was playing week in week out, in, say, the second division?" Wright told The Sun. But Wright admitted he would miss the rush of adrenaline from scoring goals in front of a sell-out crowd.

"On the pitch I'm an actor, playing to the crowd, a natural show-off," he said. He now hopes to transfer his showmanship to the big screen and has already agreed on a role in an action comedy, The Sun reported.

"I'm a natural performer," Wright said. "When the lights go on I come to life."

Owen joins practice

LONDON, Aug 18: England and Liverpool striker Michael Owen has returned to full-time training for the first time since he tore his hamstring in a premier league game in April, his club said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Boskov pleads for tolerance

BELGRADE, Aug 18: Yugoslavia coach Vujadin Boskov on Tuesday appealed for his own country and neighbouring Croatia to treat Wednesday's Euro 2000 qualifier as a sporting occasion without political significance, reports AFP.

The match between the two states will be their first meeting since Croatian independence from the Yugoslav federation in 1991 and government and opposition forces in Belgrade have already accused each other of using the potentially highly-charged game for political purposes.

Boskov said such behaviour was uncalled for in the run-up to the crucial Group Eight en-

counter, originally scheduled for March 27 but postponed because of the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis.

"The Yugoslav national football team is not a political organisation," said Boskov. "We are concentrating purely and simply on the match and we want to win three points," the Tanjug news agency quoted Boskov as saying.

Supporters from top Belgrade sides Red Star and Partizan have traditionally drawn their support from nationalist Serb communities, but they are also opposed to President Slobodan Milosevic, whom they accuse of having sold out Croatia-based Serbs and those living in Kosovo.

The opposition Democratic Party (DS), led by Zoran Djindjic, earlier claimed the Yugoslav Sports Ministry had bought half of the 55,000 tickets put on sale to distribute to sympathisers of the country's president Slobodan Milosevic.

A DS statement explained: "Fearing that the fans might whistle and boo Slobodan Milosevic, the SPS and JUL (the party of Milosevic and his wife Mira Markovic) have decided to buy half the tickets to cram the stadium with their supporters."

Milosevic was booted at several games in Belgrade and other towns in Serbia recently. Tanjug rejected the claims that tickets had been distributed to pro-government groups.

Boskov, meanwhile, brushed aside the whole tickets issue.

"We're not interested in knowing who will come to the stadium and whether they will whistle. We just want to please the fans who expect us to deliver a victory," he said.

In stark contrast, Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic adopted a more political tone.

"Any Croatian victory is a victory of the Croatian people," Croatian media quoted Blazevic as saying.

He explained he habitually told his players: "Win for our president," Franjo Tudjman.

Petit worry for Lemerre

BELFAST, Aug 18: France coach Roger Lemerre is keeping his fingers crossed that injured Arsenal midfielder Emmanuel Petit will be back for next month's crunch European Championship qualifier against Ukraine, reports AFP.

Petit has been ruled out of France's friendly against Northern Ireland at Windsor Park on Wednesday after he hurt his knee at Sunderland on Saturday.

Initially Arsenal and Lemerre feared he would be out for up to six weeks, but a scan revealed he has only suffered minor ligament damage and could be back in two weeks.

That is good news for Lemerre, who would not want to face Group Four leaders Ukraine in Kiev on September 4 without Petit.

"It's a big problem for the French team when he does not play," said Lemerre.

"I don't know if he will play against Ukraine but I hope that he will play because he is such an important player for the

French team.

"He has damaged his knee ligaments, and today they say he might only be out for two to three weeks - which gives him a chance for us."

Petit is not the only star missing from the French squad to face the Irish. They are also without Zinedine Zidane, Nicolas Anelka, Thierry Henry and Christian Karembeu, while Didier Deschamps was ruled out today with a calf injury.

But they still have plenty of big names, and their World Cup back line of Bixente Lizarazu, Marcel Desailly, Laurent Blanc and Lilian Thuram should be on show.

Bordeaux midfielder Johan Micoud is expected to make his debut, and striker Robert Pires reckons those who do play have a great chance to stake a claim for a place against Ukraine.

"It's a big challenge for the new players against Northern Ireland," he said.

It's a particularly important game for them because we all know that Zidane, Anelka, Henry and possibly Petit will be back for the next game. If the boys perform well then they will give the manager a major headache.

"We don't expect Northern Ireland to take it easy, even if it is a friendly, and we won't be taking it easy because we want to win."

Bordeaux striker Sylvain

Wiltord, who won his first cap in February and is emerging as one of the new stars of French football, agrees with Pires.

The incentive is there for the players to do well, and we want to keep our places," he said.

It is important for our preparations for the Ukraine game, and we must do well.

"We expect a difficult match and we aim to win, play well and not pick up any injuries."

Northern Ireland coach Lawrie McMenemy will try out as many of his squad as possible and Tommy Wright, James Quinn and Ian Nolan will all figure at some stage.

He is keen that the Irish build on their fine 1-0 win over the Republic of Ireland in Dublin in May.

He hopes they can use the

match against the French as a springboard for their next two European Championship Group Three qualifiers against Turkey and Germany at the start of next month.

"Let's see if we can rise to the challenge and give the sort of performance that gives us hope for the future in the three games we've got left," said McMenemy.

"It's terrible for us to be playing the world champions here in Belfast and I'm looking for a confidence booster ahead of our double header against Turkey and Germany."

Ireland coach being strict

qualifier on September 1, reports AFP.

The Republic face a schedule of three matches in eight days as they follow the Yugoslavia game with trips to play Croatia in Zagreb on September 4 and Malta in Valetta on September 8.

McCarthy is determined to have his players with him in Dublin well in advance of the first Group Eight qualifier even though that would clash with club matches.

Manchester United duo Dennis Irwin and Roy Keane would be certainties to face Newcastle on Bank Holiday Monday, August 30, while the Blackburn

Rovers' Alan McLaughlin and West Brom's Kevin Kilbane, while Wolves starlet Robbie Keane would be expected to play at Crystal Palace on Tuesday, August 31.

But McCarthy said: "I am not certain whether it is a ruling or a recommendation from UEFA to have the players available to their country but I know I want them in Dublin three days before we meet the Yugoslavs."

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