

Germany breathing easy

HELSINKI, Sept 5 (AFP): An hour of good football was enough for title holders Germany to beat Finland 2-1 in their Euro 2000 qualifier Saturday to keep top spot in Group 3 but not before a few nervous moments near the end.



ERICH RIBBECK

The Germans were under enormous public and media pressure prior to the match with everyone demanding victory and an attractive brand of football to compensate for July's shocking performance at the Confederations Cup in Mexico.

They partly rose to the occasion, but only in the first half. A Finnish revival on the hour showed that the three-times world champions still have a lot more work to do if they want to successfully defend their European title in Holland and Belgium next year.

"Our problem was that we didn't score a third goal when we were playing well," coach Erich Ribbeck said. "The Finns played uncomplicated football, sending lots of long balls into our goal area for their 1.90 metre forwards. It's tough to keep the ball on the ground and move it about when it keeps coming at you in the air."

Both German goals resulted from moves down the right wing of Oliver Neuville, who was untiring in his efforts, but Bierhoff was also assisted by the Finns' failure to pick him up.

"I thought it was good playing with such an attacking formation," Bierhoff said. "You could see that after the break when we were more defensive in our tactics that we had problems. I think three strikers is the way to go with Ulf Kirsten and Marco (Bode) so that we don't get pushed back so far into our own half."

The Germans' offensive strategy came undone however on the half hour when Kirsten was pulled down on the near wing.

His departure with a thigh muscle injury forced Ribbeck to reorganise his midfield. Central pivot Mehmet Scholl was granted more freedom to come forward but the visitors were suddenly lacking bite.

As confident as the Germans were in the first half they lost the thread totally during the final 30 minutes.

"The Finns made some changes at half time and started

with five defenders. But then they replaced defender (Harri) Ylonen with a 1.90 metre man up front which tied our back men down and made it tough to win duels in the air."

The hosts certainly had their chances and, had Barcelona star striker Jari Litmanen been fit to play, they might have made better use of



OLIVER BIERHOFF

them. Inconsistencies in Germany's tiring defence were suddenly exploited and more than once keeper Jens Lehmann was called on to risk injury as Finland's physical forwards came charging in.

"I had no choice because the Finns were putting us under pressure," Lehmann said. "It wasn't so bad though. I wasn't constantly under attack. With the Finns risking everything it was only natural that we got pushed back."

Bhuthia has to wait 3 weeks

CALCUTTA, Sept 5: Star striker Bhuthia Bhuthia, who became the first Indian to sign for an European club, was likely to get his work permit to play as a professional in England within three weeks, reports PTI.

His application for the works permit has already been submitted to the authorities in England three weeks ago and would take three more weeks for the process to be completed. FC Raj Prohit, Bhuthia's agent in England, told a press conference here yesterday.

Generally it takes six weeks to get the work permit and we do not foresee any problems, Prohit said.

Prohit, whose company Sapphire Enterprises Limited played a key role in placing Bhuthia in the Second Division club Bury FC, said Bhuthia's case was a little tough because India does not figure in the top 70 countries of the FIFA rankings.

In England, players coming from the top 70 countries find it easier to get the work permit, since Bhuthia hails from India, we have to work hard to prove that he is an exceptional player, he said.

He said that his company had mobilised support from various quarters, including former football managers, to strengthen Bhuthia's case.

Robson given absolute reign

LONDON, Sept 5: Bobby Robson, who takes over control at Newcastle this week, is to take on the role of troubleshooter at the beleaguered English Premiership side, reports AFP.

Newcastle chief executive Freddie Fletcher on Sunday revealed that the former England boss will combine his duties as Ruud Gullit's successor as manager with the masterminding of a total revamp of the club.

Fletcher said: "His first priority will be to get the team playing better and get us moving up the league."

"But we've also asked him to carry out a review of the footballing side of the club. We want him to work with the board and give us his views on a complete structure for a football club going forward."

"We're talking about scouting systems, coaching methods and medical methods - the whole structure from A to Z."

Robson has agreed to lead the Magpies until the end of the season but the manager's future could depend on his own discoveries as he compiles an assessment on the machinery of the club.

Fletcher said: "When he carries that out we'll sit down with him and discuss the future."

Robson stepped into the breach after spending eight years on the continent coaching top clubs PSV Eindhoven, Porto, Sporting Lisbon and Barcelona and Fletcher is convinced this wealth of experience will help Newcastle.

Fletcher told BBC radio: "This club needs a period of stability and someone with enormous experience in management and if you look at Bobby's experience, it's second to none."

"He's used to working with big-name players, he's used to working with different nationalities and he's used to getting the best out of players and I think these are qualities that we need."

"I hope it isn't an impossible job. It's difficult and the speculation we've seen in the last week puts people under pressure. That's the pressure you have if you're in football today."

"Someone with Bobby's experience and wise head is ideally suited to drive Newcastle forward."

Robson himself said he was satisfied with his short-term contract with the Magpies, even if it meant being sacked at the end of the season.

"If I do a great job I'll be allowed to stay, if I don't do a great job that's football and I understand it," he told BBC Television.

"It wasn't important for me to have a three-year security contract. I think your contract is yourself."

Newcastle have managed just one point from six games this season.

World champs sink further

PARIS, Sept 5: World champions France face an uphill battle to qualify for the 2000 European Championships but the other traditional powers in European football gave themselves a real shot in the arm in Saturday's qualification matches, reports AFP.

Spain and Germany kept on course for automatic qualification with impressive wins while England remain in the hunt for a play-off spot after a 6-0 drubbing of Luxembourg.

Italy, with no game Saturday, are sitting pretty while less established names Sweden, Norway and Romania look set to top their groups.

world player of the year Zinedine Zidane, whose six-month absence through injury prompted an alarming slump for the team he had inspired to a 3-0 World Cup Final win over Brazil.

But while the Juventus midfielder was the pick of the French players, Lemerre will have been concerned by a series of poor performances, notably from Real Madrid striker Nicolas Anelka.

After 53 minutes Lemerre replaced Anelka with Bordeaux striker Lilian Laslandes and Anelka looked none too pleased.

The coach tried to reassure his temperamental striker, saying: "I replaced Anelka simply because he is not fully match-fit

away to Armenia and home to Iceland. Even a play-off spot will otherwise be a tall order."

Russia lie second after their 2-0 Moscow win over Armenia. The Russians lost their first three qualifiers but since appointing Oleg Romantsev as coach have prospered, posting five consecutive wins including a brilliant 3-2 Paris win over France.

Iceland's 3-0 win over Andorra means their goal difference is better than France's.

England, meanwhile, wallowed Luxembourg ahead of the match with Poland which may decide their fate.

Striker Alan Shearer hit a hat-trick, while Real Madrid's Steve McManaman hit two and Michael Owen one.

race for top spot and only trail the Germans on goal difference with Arif Erdam's hat-trick in a 3-0 win over Northern Ireland coming in one four minute spell.

Spain shone again in Group Six, recording a 3-1 win in Austria.

Real Madrid striker Raul put them ahead only for a Fernando Hierro own goal to restore parity. But Hierro atoned with Spain's second before Barcelona's Luis Enrique sealed the points.

Now only Israel, who play Cyprus Sunday, can catch Spain.

Tottenham midfielder Oyvind Leonhardsen scored as Norway beat Greece 1-0 at Oslo to stay top of Group Two.

The only team that can topple them is surprise package Slovenia, whose 2-1 win over Georgia secured their grip on at least a play-off spot.

The match at Oslo between Norway and Slovenia in mid-week should decide who gets the automatic place.

Latvia were all but ruled out when they threw away a 3-1 lead to draw 3-3 in Albania.

In Group Eight an injury time winner from Croatia's Davor Suker against the Republic of Ireland helped his side replace the Irish at the top of the group.

But the Irish could yet benefit from the fact that the other team still in contention, Yugoslavia, must visit Croatia.

With tension high in the Balkans there is no bigger grudge match in international football.

Group 7 is a two-horse race with Romania taking top spot from Portugal.

The Portuguese rescued a point in a 1-1 draw in Azerbaijan with an injury-time goal from Barcelona's Luis Figo.

Romania took advantage, spanking Slovakia 5-1 with veteran George Hagi scoring and former Coventry striker Viorel Moldovan netting two.

In Group Nine the Czech Republic continued their 100 per cent record, hammering Lithuania 4-0 with Lazio's Pavel Nedved and Libor Koller scoring two each. The Czechs were superb even though they had already won the group and must have been tempted to take it easy.

A 2-1 win for Scotland in Bosnia made them firm favourites for the play-off spot with Dundee United's Billy Dods scoring the winner.

Two late goals for Estonia in the Faroe Islands kept them on Scotland's tail.

Shearer opens his mouth

LONDON, Sept 5 (AFP): England captain Alan Shearer angrily hit out at his critics after scoring a hat-trick in Saturday's 6-0 win over Luxembourg in the European Championship qualifier at Wembley.

The Newcastle centre-forward has been widely criticised in the English media after an apparent loss of form this season.

Shearer also had to suffer the indignity of being left on the bench by former Newcastle boss Ruud Gullit in the English premier league club's defeat to bitter local rivals Newcastle.

As he talked to reporters in the tunnel after England's victory the 29-year-old striker launched a broadside at those who had questioned his goalscoring powers and attitude.

"I don't have to answer to anyone," he said. "I don't need a confidence boost. I need chances. I am part of a Newcastle side that hasn't done well. I have to take part of the blame for that."



ALAN SHEARER

"I listen to Bobby Robson (new Newcastle manager) and Kevin Keegan (England coach) and as long as I please them I am happy. I don't listen to discredited people and I don't answer to anyone else."

Keegan said he was not surprised to see his captain answer his critics with his first ever international hat-trick.

"I'm delighted for him," said Keegan. "He's got faith in himself. He doesn't need people to have faith in him but sometimes it would help if we backed our heroes a bit more."

"People like him write their own stories and that (the hat-trick) will have given him a tremendous boost for England and Newcastle United."

BAF b'ball

Two more matches of the BAF inter-base basketball championship were held at the BAF Base Bashur playground, Kurmitola, yesterday, reports BSS.

BAF Base Matiuur Rahman defeated BAF Base Paharkanchampur 106-36.

BAF Base Matiuur Rahman beat Air Headquarters Unit 86-55.



Ronaldo is tackled by Nelson Vivas during the Argentina-Brazil friendly match in Buenos Aires on September 4. — AFP photo

Argentina blank Brazil

BUENOS AIRES, Sept 5: Argentina gave themselves a much-needed tonic with a 2-0 friendly win over eternal rivals Brazil here Saturday, reports AFP.

Goals from Lazio midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron and Parma striker Hernan Crespo were enough to see off Copa America winners Brazil in a one-sided contest.

It was a shot-in-the-arm for beleaguered coach Marcelo Bielsa who has had a turbulent first year in charge since succeeding Daniel Passarella after the World Cup.

Veron opened the scoring on the half hour with a long range shot deceiving Dida.

The second after 57 minutes was a superb move started by



JUAN VERON

Real Madrid midfielder Fernando Redondo.

He fed Juan Sorin, who linked with Cristian Gonzalez, whose pass set up Crespo, who netted with aplomb.

That belatedly stirred Brazil and Ronaldo hit the foot of the post with a well-struck shot.

Redondo, ignored for so long by long-hair hating Passarella on account of his flowing locks, was the undisputed star of the show and was well supported by

Javier Zanetti and Veron. Retired Argentinian legend Diego Maradona after the match hailed the performance as the best under Bielsa, who said afterwards: "The team's performance has left me very happy."

Bielsa had been much criticised in the Argentinian press after the disappointing Copa America campaign - they were defeated by Brazil in the quarter-finals.

It had been a dismal showing by Argentina with a hint of farce accompanying the bad results.

Boca Juniors striker Martin Palermo missed three penalties in the Copa group match defeat by Colombia - an unprecedented if dubious feat.

And Bielsa's authority was further undermined by an unedifying public slanging match at Asuncion airport with Independent forward Jose Luis Calderon with senior players having to intervene to prevent a brawl.

Significantly Bielsa omitted both Palermo and Calderon for these matches and instead recalled many of the European-based stars, including Veron, Crespo and Redondo, who had missed the Copa.

Brazil have an early opportunity to gain revenge in a second friendly in Porto Alegre, Brazil Tuesday.

Raja stun Al-Ahly

JOHANNESBURG, Sept 5: Moroccan club Raja Casablanca took a firm grip on Group 1 of the Africa Champions League with a shock 1-0 win over Al-Ahly in Egypt this weekend, reports AFP.

The top-of-the-table clash between teams who have won the competition twice each, was settled with just two minutes left when Mohamed Khouabache scored for the Green Devils.

Raja had been given little chance against the mighty Egyptians following an unimpressive single-goal home victory over 10-man Hearts of Oak from Ghana in the opening round.

Success took the Moroccans to six points after two rounds, three more than Al-Ahly and Hearts, who outclassed Shootin' Stars of Nigeria 3-0 at the Accra Sports Stadium.

Emmanuel Yatey put Hearts of Oak ahead after 26 minutes, prolific marksman Joe Fameyeh added a second 10 minutes later and Ismael Addo completed the scoring just before half-time.

Raja host pointless Stars in the third round on September 18 while Hearts entertain Al-Ahly the following day in a match neither team can afford to lose in the three-million-dollar competition.

A 26th-minute goal by Sibuiso Zuma was all Orlando Pirates of South Africa had to show for their dominance of ASM Sangaredi of Guinea in the first leg of an African Cup Winners Cup quarter-final in Johannesburg.

Thrilling midfielder and captain Thebo Mngweni and Zambian international Dennis Lotu set up Zuma, whose tame close-range shot trickled between the legs of goalkeeper Jonathan Taylor into the net.



Star England striker Michael Owen acknowledges the crowd's applause after scoring against Luxembourg in their Euro-2000 qualifier on September 4. — AFP photo



French midfielder Zinedine Zidane (R) and Ukraine's Oleg Lounji are locked in a battle for possession during their Euro 2000 qualifier in Kiev on September 4. — AFP photo

But France's 0-0 draw with Group Four leaders Ukraine saw them slip to fourth in that pool.

Before kick off France were second but a dire game in Kiev and victories for Russia and Iceland over Armenia and Andorra leave the world champions with a lot to do to reach the finals in Holland and Belgium.

France coach Roger Lemerre had been lifted by the return of

and his value is not in question.

Six months ago after his double at Wembley defeated Iceland 2-0 the former Arsenal man was hailed as the long awaited world class striker for France whose World Cup win was based on the most miserly defence in World Cup history and a brilliant midfield.

But Anelka has not scored since in a France shirt since and is yet to prove he can succeed where players such as Christophe Dugary, Stephane Guivarch, David Trezeguet and Florian Maurice have failed.

One consolation for France is that they could still top their group as Ukraine still have to visit second-placed Russia and third-placed Iceland.

Ukraine assistant coach Vladimir Veremeiev admitted: "The situation in the group has remained unchanged."

But realistically France must win their last two games -

Sweden are now virtually assured of top spot after a goal from Niclas Alexandersson sealed a 1-0 win over Bulgaria.

In Group 1 Italy are all but qualified but did not play Saturday.

However, Denmark took a giant stride towards the runners-up berth with a 2-1 home win over Switzerland.

In a game with little qualification impact Wales gave new coach Mark Hughes a lift with a 2-1 win in Belarus sealed by Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs in the 86th minute.

In Group 3 Germany stayed top with a dismal series of friendly results not affecting their competitiveness when it matters.

Oliver Bierhoff scored two early goals against Finland and they emerged 2-1 victors.

However, Turkey are in the

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

GROUP 1

At Minsk
Belarus 1 (Baranov 36) Wales 2 (Saunders 42, Gigs 86)

At Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Nielsen 53, Tomasson 81) Switzerland 1 (Turkylilmaz 80)

GROUP 2

At Tirana
Albania 3 (Bush 39, 79, Muka 90) Latvia 3 (Astavief 20, 63, Stolcevs 69)

At Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Acimovic 48, Zahovic 50) Georgia 1 (Arvaladze 55)

At Oslo
Norway 1 (Leonhardsen 35)

GROUP 3

At Helsinki
Finland 1 (Salli 63) Germany 2 (Bierhoff 2, 17)

At Belfast
Northern Ireland 0 Turkey 3 (Arif 45, 46, 49)

GROUP 4

At Reykjavik
Iceland 3 (Gudjonsson 29, Hreidarsson 33, Gudjohnsen 90) Andorra 0

At Kiev
Ukraine 0 France 0

At Moscow
Russia 2 (Beschastnykh 8-pen, Karpin 71) Armenia 0

GROUP 5

At Stockholm
Sweden 1 (Alexandersson 65) Bulgaria 0

At London
England 6 (Shearer 12-pen, 27, 34, McManaman 30, 44, Owen 90) Luxembourg 0

GROUP 6

At Vienna
Austria 1 (Hiero 50-og) Spain 3 (Raul 23, Hierro 56, Luis Enrique 88)

GROUP 7

At Bratislava
Slovakia 1 (Labant 22-pen) Romania 5 (Ilie 6, Hagi 30, Ciobotariu 66, Moldovan 88, 90)

At Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0 Hungary 0

At Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Tagi-Zade 51) Portugal 1 (Figo 90), postponed from Friday

GROUP 8

At Zagreb
Croatia 1 (Suker 90) Republic of Ireland 0

GROUP 9

At Sarajevo
Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Balic 23) Scotland 2 (Hutchinson 13, Dods 45)

At Vilnius
Lithuania 0 Czech Republic 4 (Nedved 61, 63, Koller 65, 90)

At Torshavn
Faroe Islands 0 Estonia 2 (Rein 88, Piiraga 90)

STANDINGS

Euro 2000 qualifying group tables after matches on Saturday (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Group 1

Italy	6	4	2	0	11	2	14
Denmark	7	3	2	2	8	6	11
Wales	7	3	0	4	7	14	9
Switzerland	6	2	2	2	5	5	8
Belarus	6	0	2	4	4	8	2

Group 2

Norway	8	6	1	1	15	8	19
Slovenia	8	5	2	1	12	7	17
Latvia	8	3	3	2	10	8	12
Greece	8	2	3	3	8	8	9
Albania	8	0	4	4	6	11	4
Georgia	8	1	1	6	5	14	4

Group 3

Germany	6	5	0	1	16	4	15
Turkey	6	5	0	1	14	5	15
Finland	7	2	1	4	9	12	7
Northern Ireland	6	1	2	3	3	11	5
Moldavia	7	0	3	4	6	16	3

Group 4

Ukraine	8	4	4	0	12	3	16
Russia	8	5	0	3	19	10	15
Iceland	8	4	3	1	10	3	15
France	8	4	3	1	11	6	15
Armenia	8	1	2	5	3	12	5
Andorra	8	0	0	8	2	23	0

Group 5

Sweden	6	5	1	0	7	1	16
England	7	3	3	1	14	4	12
Poland	6	4	0	2	12	6	12
Bulgaria	7	1	2	4	3	8	5
Luxembourg	6	0	0	6	2	19	0

Group 6

Spain	6	5	0	1	31	5	15
Israel	5	3	1	1	15	3	10
Austria	7	3	1	3	16	19	10
Cyprus	5	3	0	2	8	8	9
San Marino	7	0	0	7	13	6	0

Group 7

Romania	8	6	2	0	21	2	20
Portugal	8	6	1	1	28	3	19
Slovakia	8	3	2	3	9	9	11
Hungary	8	2	3	3	11	7	9
Azerbaijan	8	1	1	6	6	22	4
Liechtenstein	8	1	1	6	2	34	4