

Heartbreak for Croatia, Poland, Russia

Sigh of relief for Euro elites

PARIS, Oct 9: Europe's finest were not at their best on Saturday but the continent's last three world champions, Italy, Germany and France, all qualified automatically for Euro 2000 in Belgium and Holland next season, reports AFP.

France beat Iceland 3-2 after letting slip a 2-0 lead. Germany only drew 0-0 with Turkey, enough to win Group Three, and Italy's 0-0 draw in Belarus was also just sufficient to top group one.

The biggest losers were World Cup semi-finalists Croatia and Russia. Poland and Switzerland who were all eliminated.

Meanwhile England were allowed a back door entry into the play-offs in Group Five when Sweden beat Poland 2-0 in Stockholm.

Republic of Ireland sneaked into second spot in Group Eight too when Croatia could only draw 2-2 at home to arch rivals Yugoslavia.

In Group One, Italy's draw at Belarus enabled them to get into the finals where they will hope to do better than in 1996 in England when they failed to get through the group stages.

The 1992 champions Denmark, who were not in action, took the second play-off spot and are still on course for the showpiece finals.

Switzerland won 2-0 in Wales but it was too late to book their ticket.

In Group Two, everything was already decided with the group winners being Norway, who won 2-1 in Latvia, and surprise package Slovenia, who went through in second spot despite losing 3-0 to Greece.

Germany held off Turkey, who face qualification through the back door as group runners-up.

The Germans found themselves in the unusual position of being strangers in their own stadium with at least half the sold-out Munich crowd being vocal Turks.

The visitors were aggressive and intent on repeating their surprise 1-0 victory from the first leg match but they paid heavily for not taking advantage of the early clutch of shots on goal.

Having dominated the opening 45 minutes, Turkey's pressure wound down after the break and Germany crept back into the game.

Only an 85th-minute shot by lone-standing Erdem Arif, deflected inches wide by Bayern Munich defender Thomas Linke, had the hosts momentarily in trouble.

Third-placed Finland beat fourth-placed Northern Ireland 4-1 in Helsinki in the other group game.

Group Four was the pool which featured the most drama. French superstar David Trezeguet scored a 71st minute goal to give France victory over Iceland that, together with Russia's bizarre 1-1 draw with Ukraine, ensured the world champions qualify automatically.

France had appeared to be controlling the match after taking a 2-0 interval lead with an own goal from Rikhardur Dadason and a solo strike by Youri Djorkaeff but Iceland, helped by a dreadful error from France's World Cup winning skipper Didier Deschamps, had fought back to make the score 2-2 with goals from captain Eyjolfur Sveinsson and Brynjar Gunnarsson.

However, Trezeguet's goal, after a mistake from Iceland keeper Birgir Kristinsson, ensured the world champions qualified with Ukraine now

Velappan has no plans of leaving

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10: Asian Football Confederation (AFC) supremo Peter Velappan Sunday dispelled speculation he will end his 21-year tenure as AFC's general secretary, reports AFP.

Velappan, who is also FIFA's 2002 World Cup coordinating director, said he would oversee the overhaul of the AFC secretariat by appointing an assistant general secretary and increase the number of staff.

When asked what his position was in reference to the statement by AFC President Sultan Ahmad Shah that he wanted a full-time general secretary, the AFC supremo said: "I will help show the assistant secretary the ropes until 2002."

Newspapers Sunday reported Sultan Ahmad Shah was stepping down as the FA of Malaysia president after 15 years at the helm of the football organisation to focus his attention on the AFC.

The sultan told the Sunday Mail newspaper "I have nothing personal against Velappan but I want a secretary to be with me all the time."

Velappan said the new assistant general secretary would have to be a person "with experience and management skill."

The change to the AFC secretariat was needed to meet the growing international profile of football as a result of the 2002 World Cup coming to Japan and South Korea, he told reporters after the AFC executive committee meeting.

Velappan also said since the AFC would move to its own building in the suburbs of the Malaysian capital in April next year it would increase its staff by 100 percent from 16 at the moment.

In keeping with the AFC's profile, a major sports medicine seminar would be held here in May 24-27, 2000, he said.



Germany's Lothar Matthaeus tries to control the ball ahead of a Turkish player.

— AFP photo

STANDINGS

Tables following Euro 2000 qualifiers on Saturday. Group winners automatically qualify Portugal qualifies as best runner-up. Other runners-up compete in play-offs (Played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

GROUP ONE										
Italy	8	4	3	1	13	5	15			
Denmark	8	4	2	2	11	8	14			
Switzerland	8	4	2	2	9	5	14			
Wales	8	3	0	5	7	16	9			
Belarus	8	0	3	5	4	10	3			
GROUP TWO										
Norway	10	8	1	1	21	9	25			
Slovenia	10	5	2	3	12	14	17			
Greece	10	4	3	3	13	8	15			
Latvia	10	3	4	3	13	12	13			
Albania	10	1	4	5	8	14	7			
Georgia	10	1	2	7	8	18	5			
GROUP THREE										
Germany	8	6	1	1	20	4	19			
Turkey	8	5	2	1	15	6	17			
Finland	8	3	1	4	13	10	10			
Northern Ireland	8	1	2	5	4	19	5			
Moldova	8	0	4	4	7	17	4			
GROUP FOUR										
France	10	6	3	1	17	10	21			
Ukraine	10	5	5	0	14	4	20			
Russia	10	6	1	3	22	12	19			
Iceland	10	4	3	3	12	7	15			
Armenia	10	2	2	6	8	15	8			
Andorra	10	0	0	10	3	28	0			
GROUP FIVE										
Sweden	8	7	1	0	10	1	22			
England	8	3	4	1	14	4	13			
Poland	8	4	1	3	12	8	13			
Bulgaria	7	1	2	4	3	8	5			
Luxembourg	7	0	0	7	2	20	0			
GROUP SIX										
Spain	7	6	0	1	39	5	18			
Israel	7	4	1	2	25	6	13			
Cyprus	7	4	0	3	11	18	12			
Austria	7	3	1	3	16	19	10			
San Marino	8	0	0	8	1	44	0			
GROUP SEVEN										
Romania	10	7	3	0	25	3	24			
Portugal	10	7	2	1	32	4	23			
Slovakia	10	5	2	3	12	9	17			
Hungary	10	3	3	4	14	10	12			
Azerbaijan	10	1	1	8	6	26	4			
Liechtenstein	10	1	1	8	2	39	4			
GROUP EIGHT										
Yugoslavia	8	5	2	1	18	8	17			
Ireland	8	5	1	2	14	6	16			
Croatia	8	4	3	1	13	9	15			
Macedonia	8	2	2	4	13	14	8			
Malta	8	0	0	8	6	27	0			
GROUP NINE										
Czech Republic	10	10	0	0	26	5	30			
Scotland	10	5	3	2	15	10	18			
Estonia	10	3	2	5	15	17	11			
Bosnia Herzegovina	10	3	2	5	14	17	11			
Lithuania	10	3	2	5	8	16	11			
Faroe Islands	10	0	3	7	4	17	3			

Situation in Euro 2000 qualifying following Saturday's matches:

Automatic qualifiers	
Group 1:	Holland, Belgium
Group 2:	Winner Italy
Group 3:	Winner Norway
Group 4:	Winner Germany
Group 5:	Winner France
Group 6:	Winner Sweden
Group 7:	Winner Spain
Group 8:	Winner Romania, runners-up Portugal
Group 9:	Winner Yugoslavia
Group 10:	Winner Czech Republic
Portugal qualify as best runner-up. Other runners-up in groups will compete in two-leg play-off ties.	
They are: Denmark, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine, England, Republic of Ireland, Scotland	
(N.B: Only undecided issue is second-place in group 6).	



France's Lilian Thuram and Iceland's Rikhardur Dadason fight for possession on October 9.

— AFP photo

AFC accepts FIFA's offer

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10: Asian football officials on Sunday accepted FIFA's offer for four berths in the 2002 World Cup and a playoff with Europe for a chance at another, reports AFP.

With the acceptance, the boycott threat by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to demonstrate Asian dissatisfaction with the allocation of World Cup spots has been resolved.

Peter Velappan, AFC general-secretary said it accepted FIFA's two-plus-two-and-a-half seat offer with a measure of "disappointment."

"We accept it but we are disappointed," Velappan told reporters after the executive committee meeting here. AFC had demanded an extra berth outright.

FIFA had initially offered Asia two automatic spots -- one each for joint hosts South Korea and Japan -- and another two qualifying berths.

AFC protested the allocation and threatened a boycott of the qualifying rounds if the continent was not given an extra berth.

The wrangle led to a walkout of AFC members at Fifa's congress in Los Angeles on July

GROUP FIVE
At Stockholm
Sweden 2 (K. Andersson 64, Larsson 90) Poland 0

GROUP SEVEN
At Baku
Azerbaijan 0 Slovakia 1 (Labant 71)

At Lisbon
Portugal 3 (Rui Costa 14-pen, Joao Pinto 15, Xavier 58) Hungary 0

At Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0 Romania 3 (Rosu 26, Ganea 65, 73)

GROUP EIGHT
At Skopje
Macedonia 1 (Stavrevski 93) Republic of Ireland 1 (Quinn 18)

At Zagreb
Croatia 2 (Boksic 20, Stanic 47) Yugoslavia 2 (Mijatovic 26, Stankovic 31)

GROUP NINE
At Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Koller 11, Verbir 84) Faroe Islands 0

At Glasgow
Scotland 3 (Hutchinson 48, McSwegan 50, Cameron 88) Lithuania 0

At Tallinn
Estonia 1 (Oper 3) Bosnia-Herzegovina 4 (Balic 40, 58, 67, 87)

Anelka puts up a brave face

MADRID, Oct 10: Out-of-form French striker Nicolas Anelka assured his new club Real Madrid Sunday that he hasn't forgotten how to play football, reports AFP.

The former Arsenal player has yet to score a goal since moving to Real for 23 million pounds (38 million dollars) after a contracted contract over this summer.

But the troubled 20-year-old assured Spanish sports daily As: "I haven't forgotten how to play. I just need time. If, since the start I'd played well and put in some good matches it would all have been too simple."

"I'm someone who understands that when it comes to lie, I just need time."

Anelka, set to return to action after injury in the hotbed atmosphere of the Nou Camp stadium against Barcelona on Wednesday, is aiming to score over ten goals for John Toshack's First Division outfit this season.

"If I think of my perfect game I'll score my first goal for Real on Wednesday. The stadium in Barcelona is the best place to open my account," he said.

Sultan Ahmad Shah to step down

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10: Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President Sultan Ahmad Shah will quit the leadership of the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM), reports said Sunday, reports AFP.

In a surprise announcement, Sultan Ahmad Shah said he was stepping down to concentrate on leading the AFC into the next millennium.

"I believe it is time for me to focus my attention on the AFC and the task of overseeing the development of soccer on the continent," Sultan Ahmad Shah, who has been FAM president since 1984 was quoted as saying by the Sunday Mail newspaper.

Sultan Ahmad Shah said he would inform the FAM council of his intention to quit when the body meets in November. The next congress of FAM, at which elections are to be held, is scheduled for March-April 2000.

Sultan Ahmad Shah has been unchallenged as president of the FAM since 1984 when he took over the national body from Hamzah Abu Samah, incidentally the man who also preceded him at the AFC presidency.

FAM presidents have usually doubled up as presidents of the AFC. Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman having led the way from 1958 to 1978.

Sultan Ahmad Shah's decision to shift his attention means he now requires a full-time general secretary, raising doubts about the position of AFC supremo Peter Velappan, Sunday Mail said.

Velappan, AFC general secretary since 1978, was appointed as the FIFA coordination director of the 2002 World Cup in Korea-Japan, giving him an option to work from four different places -- the AFC secretariat here, FIFA headquarters in Zurich or organising committee centres in Tokyo and Seoul.

Brazil come from behind



AMSTERDAM, Oct 10: The Netherlands let slip a two-goal lead and missed a penalty to draw 2-2 with Brazil in a friendly at the Amsterdam Arena on Saturday, reports Reuters.

In a game which began slowly but turned into a thriller, the Dutch went ahead thanks to an own goal when Brazilian Roberto Carlos knocked in Arsenal winger Dennis Bergkamp's cross in the 37th minute. The Netherlands, missing key defenders Frank de Boer and Jaap Stam, took heart from the goal and began to push forward. They were rewarded less than 10 minutes later when another Bergkamp cross found an unmarked Boudewijn Zenden, who headed it easily past Brazilian keeper Dida.

Going into the second half 2-0 up, the Dutch side, who will co-host next year's European championship with Belgium, seemed to relax a little. Juninho and Savio were brought on to live up to the Brazil attack and it was only a matter of time before the South Americans

pulled back. Ten minutes into the half, Roberto Carlos grabbed the chance to redeem himself by converting a loose ball on the left.

But only a minute later a tackle on Zenden earned the Dutch a penalty and the opportunity to go 3-1 up. Kluijvert's feeble shot, however, was no challenge for Dida.

Kluijvert had a chance to make amends in the 59th minute, but his shot from Clarence Seedorf's corner again lacked the power, much to the Barca striker's frustration.

Defender Cafu drew level for Brazil in the 72nd minute, when his long-range shot went in off the post, leaving Dutch keeper Edwin van der Sar, who otherwise put in a fine performance, with no chance.

Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard was disappointed with the result, but relatively happy with his side's performance. Under his charge, the Dutch have only won one game, his first, with no victory in the last 10 matches.

"I think it was a positive match for us. We went two up,

had the chance to make it 3-1, at which point we should have won... but to end 2-2 from two ahead... does not make you happy," he said.

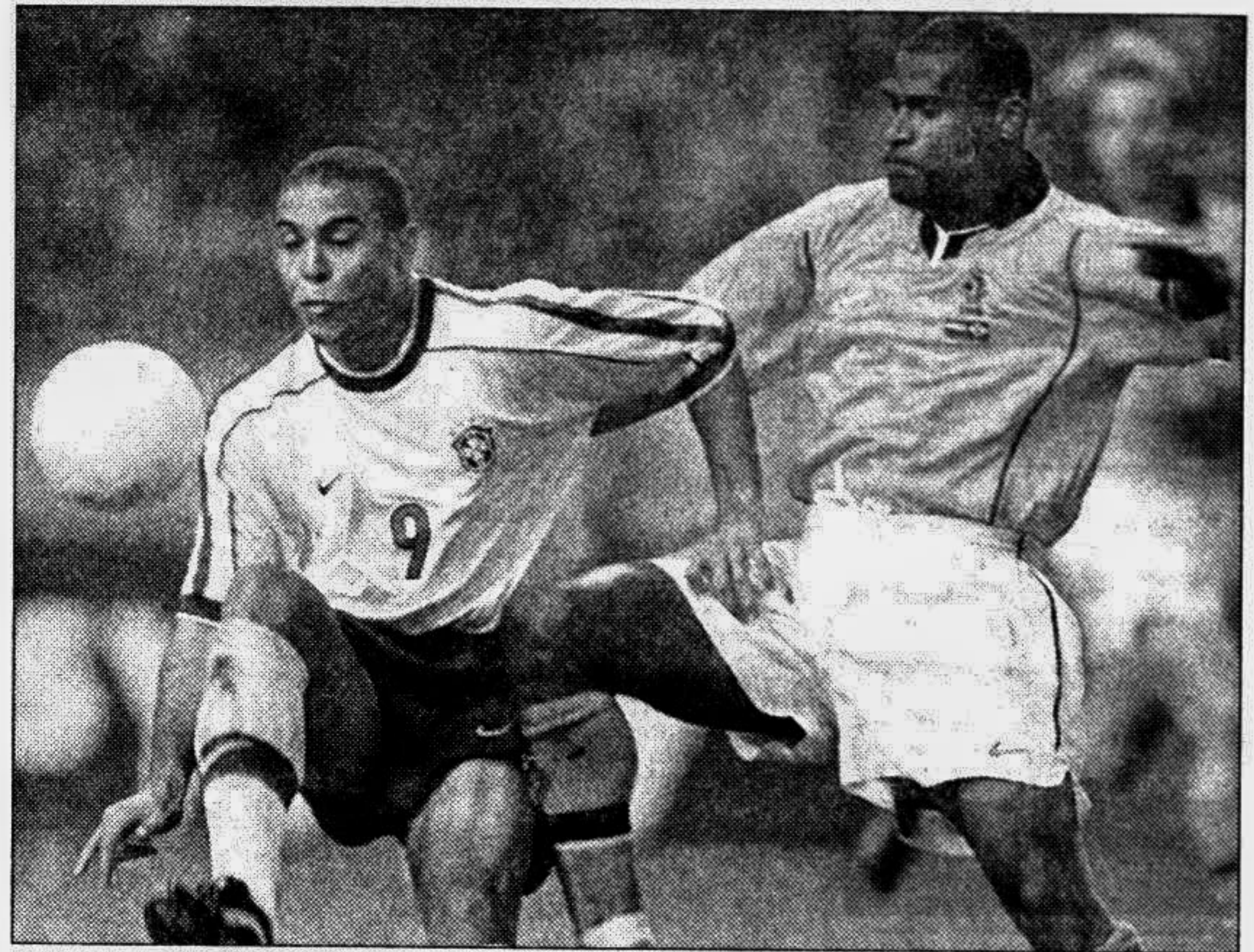
Brazilian coach Wanderley Luxemburgo was, on the other hand, satisfied with his team's resilience.

"We tested our a few new players and until the first goal I think we were playing better... but I think the positive factor was our ability to come back from two behind," he said.

SQUADS

Netherlands: Edwin van der Sar, Ronald de Boer, Bert Kontermann, Winston Bogarde, Marc Van Houtum, Aron Winter (Jean Paul van Gastel, 46th minute), Giovanni van Bronckhorst, Clarence Seedorf, Boudewijn Zenden (Peter van Ossen, 83rd), Dennis Bergkamp (Ruud van Nistelrooy), Patrick Kluijvert.

Brazil: Dida, Cafu, Antonio Carlos, Roque Junior, Roberto Carlos, Vampeta (Juninho, 46th), Emerson, Rivaldo, Felipe (Ronaldinho, 67th), Ronaldo (Marcos Assuncao, 76th), Elber (Savio, 46th).



Brazilian forward Ronaldo (L) is challenged by Winston Bogarde in a friendly match in Amsterdam.

— AFP photo

French nerves ease



PARIS, Oct 10 (AFP): France was thanking superb super-sub David Trezeguet who scored a 71st minute goal to give them a 3-2 victory over Iceland that, together with Russia's bizarre 1-1 draw with Ukraine, ensured they qualify automatically for next summer's European Championship as Group Four winners.

Trezeguet's goal, after a mistake from Iceland keeper Birgir Kristinsson, ensured the world champions qualified with Ukraine now having to negotiate a two-legged play-off.

France's players were all smiles and the relief was palpable for a team that had gone into their final match in third place in the group and with a play-off place seeming their most likely avenue to next year's finals in Holland and Belgium.

And they admitted there was a lot to do before next year's tournament if France were to live up to their world champion status.

Deschamps said: "We were lucky to be leading 2-0. We had a near fatal first 10-15 minutes in the second half and made mistakes, myself in particular for the second goal. But we rolled up our sleeves and went looking for the third goal."

Asked if France were finding the world champions tag a burden Deschamps said: "Last year we touched the roof of the world, the feeling is less high. But we are happy to qualify."

His close friend Marcel Desailly, a confidant of Deschamps since their days together in the Nantes youth team, admitted France's once rock-solid defence -- the cornerstone of their World Cup win -- was showing signs of strain.

He said: "We must look at the pictures (of this game) and learn

from them. We must not make a habit of losing goals."

French coach Roger Lemerre restricted his comments afterwards to say: "I have accomplished my mission. After today I am and will remain the biggest supporter of the French team."

Earlier on the pitch France had the better of the first half and took a deserved 18th-minute lead, admittedly with a huge stroke of luck.

Djorkaeff bent in a freekick and 27-year-old Dadason, who plays for Norway's Viking Stavanger, diverted the ball past Kristinsson.

The French players celebrated in low key fashion looking almost embarrassed by the manner of the goal but the relief throughout the Stade de France was palpable.

Three minutes later the impressive Zinedine Zidane and Djorkaeff set up Sylvain Wiltord who failed to test the goalkeeper.

Then a beautiful backheel from Zidane set up Bixente Lizarazu who fired just wide and then Zidane again conjured up a chance