

Beckham relief for United

LONDON, Oct 12: Premiership champions Manchester United received a welcome boost Thursday when it was revealed that David Beckham does not need surgery on his damaged left knee, reports AFP.

There was real concern that the England midfielder might be suffering ligament damage and would need an operation after hobbling off in last Saturday's 1-0 home defeat against Germany.

However, after a visit to a specialist, it was discovered that the injury was not as serious as was first feared.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said Beckham would be available to take part in the club's European campaign when the Champions League resumes next week.

"It was never anything more than a strain," said Ferguson. "He needs a few days rest and he will definitely be fit to play against PSV Eindhoven next week."

Beckham, 25, will be given a training session on Friday to assess whether he has a chance of making the squad for the visit to Filbert Street to face Premiership leaders Leicester on Saturday.



Finland's Mikael Forsell (L) is under pressure from England captain Martin Keown during their World Cup qualifier in Helsinki on October 11. — AFP photo

Ominous signs for US football

WASHINGTON, Oct 12: United States television ratings are so bleak for football that already minimal coverage of Major League Soccer (MLS) is being slashed, reports AFP.

ABC Sports apparently will exercise a contract option and drop four of six telecasts of the US football league in 2001, showing only the league final and all-star game.

MLS is the lowest rated league series among US sport viewers with only a 0.7 average. ABC's contract, which includes plentiful MLS coverage on its ESPN networks, runs through 2003 with adjusting or cancellation possible after 2000.

"At this point, I can tell you the 2001 MLS Cup and 2001 All-Star Game will be on ABC. Everything else we're hoping for," MLS spokesman Dan Courtemanche said.

The move is yet another credibility blow to MLS, which struggled through another season of dwindling attendance and a lack of money to compete with European leagues for the world's top players.

The MLS Cup final will be played here Friday when the Chicago Fire goes for a second title in three years against the Kansas City Wizards.

WC 2002 qualifying

Draw keeps USA, Costa Rica waiting

COLUMBUS, Ohio, Oct 12: Victory would have lifted either Costa Rica or the United States into next year's North American World Cup 2002 qualifying finals, but the teams played to a goalless draw here Wednesday, reports AFP.

Now both nations must wait until the final day of the semifinal round-robin competition, November 15, to determine their fate.

"It was a very balanced match," Costa Rica coach Gilson Nunes said. "We're satisfied with the result because we felt we were standing pretty good."

Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Honduras have already secured spots in next year's six-team continental qualifying tournament to determine three berths in the 2002 World Cup Finals to be co-hosted by Japan and South Korea.

Had either Costa Rica or the US team won here, the nation would have sealed a berth in the final six. But the draw leaves each vulnerable from Guatemala to claim one of the final two Group E berths.

Costa Rica kept the group lead at 3-1 with one drawn for 10 points with the US team moving to 2-1 with two drawn for eight points. Guatemala stood third at 2-2 with one drawn for seven points.

Final matches find Costa Rica at Guatemala needing only a draw to advance and the US team visiting Barbados, where a victory would assure advancement.

"It was a little disappointing to get a tie," said forward Josh Wolff, who had a goal called back due to offside three minutes into stoppage time. "We didn't give up any points. We got a point."

Before a crowd of 24,430 at Columbus Crew Stadium, the Americans entered the match severely handicapped. They played without four key players due to injuries or suspension and coach Bruce Arena banished.

Playmaking midfielder Claudio Reyna started his two-game suspension for his post-game conduct in the first match against Costa Rica, a 2-1 loss in July.

Midfielders Eddie Lewis (red card) and Earnie Stewart (yellow-card accumulation) also missed the match, each with a one-game ban. Forward Brian McBride also has been sidelined indefinitely with a blood clot in his arm.

As if that wasn't enough, Arena wasn't allowed to coach the team. He began his three-match suspension for berating the referee after the first Costa Rica encounter in the stands while assistant coach David Sarachan ran things from the bench.

Finland fuse England

HELSINKI, Oct 12: England began life without coach Kevin Keegan with an uninspiring 0-0 draw against Finland on Wednesday in their World Cup 2002 European Zone Group 9 qualifying match here on Wednesday, reports AFP.

Keegan resigned after Saturday's 1-0 home defeat by group favourites Germany, and although Ray Parlour almost won it right at the end when his powerful shot hit the underside of the crossbar, England's campaign continued to falter.

Missing the injured quartet of David Beckham, Tony Adams, Graeme Le Saux and Gary Neville, England looked far from convincing and have now picked up just one point from their opening two matches.

A point for Finland means they now have four points after two games having beaten Albania in their opener in Helsinki in September.

England struggled to find form against a determined Finland side but were unfortunate not to see the home goalkeeper sent off early on after striker Teddy Sheringham was brought down on the edge of the penalty area.

Keegan's shock departure caught Finnish printers by surprise as he was still included in the match programme as England coach.

After seven minutes, a dreadful decision by French referee Alain Sars prevented England taking the lead. A bad back pass left Sheringham with a clear run at goal and he slipped the ball past keeper Antti Niemi.

But the Hearts' keeper hauled the United striker down outside the area as he was about to knock the ball into an empty net and incredibly escaped with only a booking.

England were furious with the referee and when the free kick was eventually taken Sheringham's effort was struck tamely into the defensive wall.

Both teams struggled with the blustery conditions as play swung from end to end but it was England who were carving out the better chances, but they failed to find the target and a mistake by Dennis Wise almost gave the home side the lead.

The Chelsea captain tried to dribble the ball out of defence and it broke to Forsell whose fierce effort was only inches too high.

The wind picked up in the second period making it difficult for both teams to settle on the ball and play became scrappy with chances at a premium.

Finland did most of the pressing but the overall quality of the game was poor.

Jari Litmanen was behind most of the few moments of quality and one pass picked out Forsell, whose eventual shot was blocked.

The game still lacked sparkle although Forsell missed a great chance to give the Finns the lead 14 minutes from time.

A back-heel took him clear of the England defence but he lost control and that gave England goalkeeper David Seaman the chance to block.

Despite struggling to find form, England came close to escaping with a last-minute victory when Parlour's shot bounced off the underside of Niemi's crossbar.

Television replays suggested the ball may have crossed the line but a win for England would have been harsh on the home side who were worthy of a point.

Italy sail on Del Piero double

ANCONA, Italy, Oct 12: Alessandro Del Piero took full advantage of the international lifeline handed to him by Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni, converting two second-half penalties in the 2-0 victory over Georgia here Wednesday in a World Cup European Zone Group 8 qualifier.

Del Piero had been recalled to the starting line-up only thanks to the illness that struck down his Juventus team-mate Filippo Inzaghi on Tuesday morning and Trapattoni even felt it necessary to say that he had not recalled the underfire star out of charity.

But his successful conversions after 46 and 85 minutes amply repaid the coach's faith.

After the match there was no need for Trapattoni to justify his choice and he said merely: "It went well for him."

The two penalties were just the tonic for Italy who had had a difficult first period against a Georgia side buoyant after beating Lithuania 4-0 in Vilnius at the weekend.

And the visitors were a match for the hosts before the break.

"In the first period Georgia made us suffer," said Trapattoni. "In the end the result seemed a fair one to me. But Georgia have proved themselves our toughest opponents so far."

The match was lacking in the adventurous football produced by Italy last Saturday in the 3-0 drubbing of Romania in Milan but it was the right result and once Del Piero had given them the lead they scarcely looked like surrendering it.

The closest either side came to scoring in the first period was when Fabio Cannavaro's header was cleared off the line by Georgia full back Levan Silagadze but Italy were also lucky to escape when Valerio Bertotto was booked for crudely halting a surge from Temuri Ketsbaia on the edge of the box.

A yellow card was the reward for Bertotto but Georgi Kinkladze curled the freekick high and wide.

Georgia were more than fulfilling the pre-match predictions of Trapattoni and defender Alessandro Nesta that they and not Romania are Italy's biggest rivals in the group.

But less than a minute into the second period Italy got the breakthrough.

There seemed little contact when Francesco Totti fell in the box under pressure from two Georgian defenders but Swedish referee Karl-Erik Nilsson awarded the penalty and Del Piero volunteered for service, sending Georgian keeper David Gvaramadze the wrong way from the spot.

Italy took control and Trapattoni introduced Gennaro Gattuso in place of Delvecchio in a clear bid to preserve the lead.

But just as the points looked to be in the bag, the otherwise commanding Toldo almost let them slip, fumbling a free kick, but Kavashvili failed to take advantage from the rebound, hesitating instead of shooting.

Finally Del Piero completed a memorable comeback when he was brought down by Gvaramadze and successfully converted the penalty.

It leaves Italy sitting pretty with two home wins after they were lucky to escape with a 2-2 draw in their opening match with Hungary in Budapest.



Georgia's Rekhviashvili (in front) and Francesco Totti are in pursuit of the ball during their World Cup qualifier in Ancona on October 11. — AFP photo

Fake passport scandal goes to parliament

LISBON, Oct 12: The issue of South American footballers playing for Italian clubs and passports came before the Portuguese parliament on Wednesday, with the opposition demanding "an end to this scandal", reports AFP.

Opposition party leader Herminio Loureiro said the affair had called into question "the good name and prestige of Portugal".

The scandal reached its peak on September 14 in Warsaw when two Brazilian players from Italian First Division side Udinese, Silva Warley and Valentim Alberto, were detained for several hours after being caught holding fake Portuguese passports.

Last week, Uruguay's Alejandro Da Silva and Brazilian Henrique Amaral Jorginho were deported from Italy by Udinese police for similar offences.

The most-publicised case was that of Brazilian star Edu, who was refused entry to England at Heathrow Airport while on his way to joining Premiership side Arsenal for presenting a fake Portuguese passport.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

PARIS, Oct 12 (AFP): Collated results from European Zone 2002 World Cup qualifiers on Wednesday:

GROUP 1 Moscow
Russia 3 (Buznikin 19, Khlolov 57, Titov 90) Luxembourg 0

Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Siljak 44, Acimovic 79) Switzerland 2 (Turkylmaz 20, 66)

GROUP 2 Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Kinsella 25, Dunne 50) Estonia 0

Rotterdam
Holland 0 Portugal 2 (Conceicao 10, Pauleta 44)

GROUP 3 Valetta
Malta 0 Czech Republic 0

Copenhagen
Denmark 1 (Sand 72) Bulgaria 1 (Berbatov 83)

Reykjavik
Iceland 1 (Gudjonsson 89) Northern Ireland 0

GROUP 4 Baku
Azerbaijan 0 Turkey 1 (Sukur 72)

Chisinau
Moldova 0 Macedonia 0

Bratislava
Slovakia 0 Sweden 0

GROUP 5 Minsk
Belarus 2 (Khatskevich 23, Ryndyuk 33) Armenia 1 (Khozlovyan 50)

Oslo
Norway 0 Ukraine 1 (Shlevchenko 50)

Warsaw
Poland 0 Wales 0

GROUP 6 Zagreb
Croatia 1 (Boksic 16) Scotland 1 (Gallagher 24)

GROUP 7 Tel Aviv
Israel 3 (Berkovic 12, Abukasis 63, Yaniv 76) Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Akrapovic 48)

Vienna
Austria 1 (Baur 21) Spain 1 (Baraja 27)

GROUP 8 Kaunas
Lithuania 1 (Buistkus 70) Hungary 6 (Illes 26, Fehér 36, 62, 70, Horvat 66, Liztes 87)

Ancona
Italy 2 (Del Piero 46-pen, 88-pen) Georgia 0

GROUP 9 Helsinki
Finland 0 England 0

Tirana
Albania 2 (Bushli 50, Vaka 93) Greece 0

UEFA discipline Chelsea, MU stars

LONDON, Oct 12: A UEFA disciplinary panel on Thursday fined David Beckham 10,000 Swiss francs (5,460 dollars) for an act of indiscipline in his side's Champions League clash away to Dutch title holders PSV Eindhoven last month, reports AFP.

The Manchester United midfielder was reported by a UEFA delegate for spitting close to referee Markus Merk.

Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink and Frank Leboeuf, meanwhile, were given two-match bans for their outbursts as Chelsea crashed out of Europe.

UEFA imposed the penalty on Dutch striker Hasselbaink and French defender Leboeuf after the pair insulted the referee in the UEFA Cup first-round match with St Gallen.

Chelsea went out of the competition 2-1 on aggregate after losing the second-leg match in Switzerland 2-0.

Norway manager ready to resign

OSLO, Oct 12: Nils Johan Semb has offered to resign as Norway manager after his side's dismal 1-0 home defeat by Ukraine in Wednesday night's World Cup 2002 Group 5 qualifying match, reports AFP.

Semb said on Thursday: "My job is available."

The NTB news agency reported that the Norwegian Football Association would meet to decide whether to accept his resignation.

Semb's announcement comes after Norway have taken just two points from three games, five points behind Group 5 leaders Poland and with a mountain to climb if they are to qualify for the finals in Japan and South Korea.

The 41-year-old manager took over in August 1998 and helped Norway qualify for the recent Euro 2000 tournament.

Djorkaeff ruled out

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany, Oct 12: French international midfielder Youri Djorkaeff will miss Kaiserslautern's German First Division clash against rivals 1860 Munich on Saturday, the club announced Thursday, reports AFP.

The World Cup and Euro 2000 winner is suffering from a thigh injury and has only been able to undertake light jogging this week.

It will be the club's first match under new coach Andreas Brehne, appointed after Otto Rehagel resigned two weeks ago following the 1-1 against bottom-of-the-table Energie Cottbus.

Minnows make their mark

PARIS, Oct 12: It was a night to remember for several of Europe's lesser footballing lights on Wednesday as the World Cup 2002 qualifying competition got underway in earnest, reports AFP.

Pride of place must go to little Albania who wrapped up an unexpected 2-0 win over Greece in Group 9, the second goal coming deep into injury time from Ervin Vaka.

It was a result which makes England's task of qualifying for the finals in Japan and South Korea all the harder.

Coupled with their own failure to come away from Helsinki with anything more than a lacklustre 0-0 draw, the news from Tirana means that the English have an uphill struggle, having taken just one point from two games.

In terms of achievement, Scotland ran the Albanians close by grabbing a well-deserved 1-1 draw away to Croatia in Zagreb in Group 6.

Considered the second best team in Europe behind France, the Croats took the lead in the 16th minute through the stylish Alen Boksic but once Kevin Callagher had levelled eight minutes later, the tenacious Scots shut up shop and were in no mood to let a point slip from their grasp.

The Republic of Ireland, with away draws against the Netherlands and Portugal already under their belts, put themselves in a strong position to qualify from Group 2 with a convincing 2-0 win over Estonia.

After a few early scares, goals from Mark Kinsella in the 24th minute and Richard Dunne five minutes after half-time killed off the Estonian challenge.

But the fact that Portugal managed to beat the Dutch 2-0 in Rotterdam put a slight damper on the night's celebrations.

First half goals from Conceicao and Pauleta put the Portuguese top of the group with seven points, one ahead of Estonia, with Ireland third on five.

Spain had to settle for a 1-1 draw away to Austria in Vienna in Group 7, and even went behind in the 20th minute when Michael Baur struck for the home side, but a 27th minute header from Sergi Baraja sealed a point.

Malta earned a rare point in Group 3 by holding the Czech Republic to a goalless draw in Valetta, while in Group 1, two goals from Khabay Turkylmaz gave Switzerland a 2-2 draw against Slovenia in Ljubljana.

Wales, written off after their defeat in Belarus and a draw at home to Norway at the weekend, improved their chances in group 6 with a 0-0 draw in Poland.

But there was to be no fairytale for Georgia in Ancona in Group 8 as Italy clinically grabbed all three points thanks to two penalties from Alessandro del Piero.

While Iceland grabbed a dramatic 1-0 victory over Northern Ireland in Reykjavik when Thorudur Gudjonsson scored in the final minute, Roy Carroll came and missed. Eidor Gudjonsson's free-kick, headed by Helguson, headed the ball over the Irish goalkeeper and Gudjonsson nodded it into the empty net.

The defeat was Northern Ireland's first of their World Cup qualifying campaign and leaves them fourth in Group Three with four points, with Iceland fifth on three points after losing their two previous games.

STANDINGS

PARIS, Oct 12 (AFP): European Zone World Cup group tables after Wednesday's fixtures (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

GROUP ONE	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Russia	3	1	2	0	6	5	5
Slovenia	3	1	1	1	7	4	4
Switzerland	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Yugoslavia	2	0	1	1	3	7	1
Faroe Islands	3	0	0	3	1	7	0
GROUP TWO	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Portugal	4	2	0	2	4	6	6
Estonia	3	1	2	0	5	3	5
Rep of Ireland	3	1	1	1	6	4	4
Netherlands	2	1	0	1	3	6	3
Cyprus	3	0	0	3	3	6	0
GROUP THREE	3	2	1	0	5	0	7
Czech Republic	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Denmark	3	1	1	1	4	2	4
Bulgaria	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Northern Ireland	3	1	0	2	2	6	3
Iceland	3	0	1	2	0	4	1
GROUP FOUR	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Turkey	3	2	1	0	3	0	7
Slovakia	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Sweden	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Macedonia	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Moldova	3	0	1	2	0	3	1
Azerbaijan	3	0	0	3	0	5	0
GROUP FIVE	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Poland	3	2	0	1	5	5	6
Belarus	3	2	0	1	5	5	6
Ukraine	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Wales	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Norway	3	0	1	2	3	5	1
GROUP SIX	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Scotland	2	1	1	0	4	0	4
Belgium	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Croatia	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
San Marino	2	0	0	2	0	5	0
Latvia	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
GROUP SEVEN	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
Spain	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Israel	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Austria	2	0	0	2	2	5	0
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2	0	0	2	0	3	0
Liechtenstein	3	2	1	0	7	2	7
GROUP EIGHT	2	1	1	0	8	3	4
Hungary	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Georgia	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Romania	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Lithuania	3	0	0	3	1	11	0
GROUP NINE	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Germany	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Finland	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Albania	3	1	0	2	1	4	3
Greece	2	0	1	1	0	1	1



Portuguese superstar Luis Figo (No 7) trying to keep possession against Michael Reiziger of the Netherlands during their World Cup qualifier in Rotterdam on October 11. — AFP photo

Make or break Tardelli

APPIANO GEN- TILES, Italy, Oct 12: New Inter Milan coach Marco Tardelli took command of the ailing Serie A giants here Wednesday and promptly admitted he could be walking the primrose path to the football equivalent of eternal damnation.

The former Italian international midfielder, who replaces the sacked Marcello Lippi, was under no illusions about the size of his task and admitted that he would face a swift judgement from Inter fans and president Massimo Moratti alike.

"The time has come to drag Inter out of this limbo," said the 1982 World Cup hero who admitted the halo bestowed on him 18 years ago could soon be exchanged for fire and brimstone.

"I don't like half measures," he continued. "Either we are going to hell or we are going to heaven."

Tardelli, who will be assisted by Luca Giannini and fitness coach Stefano D'Ottavio, was flanked by Inter general manager Gabriele Oriani and another Italian great of yesteryear Claudio Faccioli, in charge of the club's international relations as he marked the transition of power with his first press call.

Tardelli said he had no reservations about working with Moratti who is not renowned for his patience with underperforming coaches.

Asked who had lured him to Inter he said: "Moratti, of course. He called me to offer me the Inter job and I accepted with enthusiasm. I like demanding tasks and I don't think it will be as difficult as everyone says."

"I played at Inter so many years ago," said Tardelli. "Having arrived here late as a player, now I am returning to Appiano I feel a bit emotional - I hope I will be here for a long time."

Tardelli would not say what changes he would make or what tactics he would employ, saying merely: "We will see."

For now, the priority is to win at all costs. On Saturday (at home to Napoli) we must take the three points and show the fans we want to get out of this hole. The San Siro fans will not indulge me and I don't want them to. The fans must only help the team."

The 1982 World Cup winning hero was given a winning send-off by the Italian under-21 side on Tuesday night with a 3-2 victory over Georgia at Fermo.

Speaking after that match he would not say if he would headhunt his under-21 stars at the expense of foreign talent - there is a growing backlash against overseas players in Italy.

"How will Inter play? A team with too many foreigners? We will see, give me time," he said.

But at Wednesday's press call he gave a hint that homegrown youth might be the way forward when he identified one of his "Azzurrini" Andrea Pirlo - on the books at Inter - as "a very important player".

Tardelli is still revered in Italy for his role in the 1982 World Cup triumph and his euphoric bulging-eyed goal celebration after giving the "Azzurri" a 2-0 lead in the 3-1 World Cup Final win over West Germany remains one of the defining images of that tournament.

His coaching career has until now been relatively low key. Beginning in 1988 with the Italian under-16s he graduated to the under-21s before stints with unheralded clubs Como and Cesena. In the 1997-8 season he returned to take charge of the under-21 national side where he has built a formidable reputation.

Another 1982 hero Claudio Gentile is odds on to replace Tardelli as under-21 coach and assisted Italian national team coach Giovanni Trapattoni at training Tuesday evening although a formal announcement is yet to be made.

Leverkusen striker banned

BERLIN, Oct 12: Paulo Rink, the Bayer Leverkusen striker, was suspended for six weeks by the German Football Federation on Thursday, reports AFP.

The 27-year-old German international was sent off during the league match against 1860 Munich on September 30.