

Giants make big strides



AFP, Paris

Germany and Italy had convincing wins in European World Cup qualifiers on Wednesday night to give them commanding leads in their European zone groups.

Germany's 4-2 win over Greece in Group Nine, helped by late goals from Miroslav Klose and Marco Bode, means they have four wins out of four and lead the group from England, 3-1 winners in Albania, by five points.

Italy, like Germany three-time world champions, are also well on course with 13 points from five matches after their 4-0 thrashing of Lithuania in Trieste.

Italy, seven points ahead of second-placed Romania, whom they beat on Saturday, can virtually assure their passage to Japan and Korea from Group Eight.

A late equaliser by the world's most expensive footballer at 56 million dollars Luis Figo scraped

Portugal a 2-2 draw at home to Holland but it was Republic of

at the break, before Marco Bode's goal in the final seconds made the

his second yellow card however and misses their June 2 match in Finland.

Although they played half an hour a man down, Germany still managed to victory in their 700th football international. Marko Rehmer put them ahead on six minutes though Angelos Chariteas equalised in the 21st minute only for Michael Ballack to add a second from a penalty four minutes later.

Giorgos Georgiadis equalised two minutes from half-time to cap a high-scoring first half.

The result kept up the impressive record of coach Rudi Voller who now has five victories from seven starts.

Voller said afterwards: "It was a completely different match than against Albania. We had luck in certain stages of the game but this victory came at a great time."

"We knew the Greeks had problems in defence but in attack they were extremely dangerous. Nevertheless we played a great match today and I want to compliment the whole team. We are a good squad and we are all pulling in the same direction."

"Now we have a real team again and that's very important."

Italy defeated Lithuania 4-0 to consolidate their grip on the competition.

Two goals apiece from Juventus team-mates Filippo Inzaghi and Alessandro Del Piero ensured Giovanni Trapattoni's side are looking good to reach next year's tournament in Japan and South Korea.

Italy were lethargic in a first-half played in torrential rain but led at the break through an Inzaghi goal.

The rain stopped but the floodgates opened in the second period with Del Piero and Inzaghi, who have fallen out off the pitch, getting on famously on it.

"Impeccable," said Trapattoni. "We took some time to get started and I think we needed to concentrate more in the first half but we showed more maturity later."

"That's what we need if we are going to measure up to the big European sides like France and Spain. But this is a big signal that our football is in good health."

Under-fire Andy Cole broke his international goal-scoring duck as Sven-Goran Eriksson's resurgent England grabbed a 3-1 win over Albania.

Cole repaid Eriksson's public show of support for him with a 90th minute close-range effort - his first goal in 13 appearances - to put England firmly back on track for a place in next year's World Cup finals.

Earlier, goals from Liverpool striker Michael Owen and Cole's Manchester United team-mate Paul Scholes had put England into a 2-0 lead before Albania pulled a goal back on 90 minutes through Altin Rrakli.

Eriksson looked unhappy with the slack defending surrounding the Albanian effort - but was only too pleased to accentuate the positive after his team's second victory in four days following the 2-1 win over Finland on Saturday.

"At least now no one will write that it was six years since he has scored," Eriksson said after a win which leaves England second in Group Nine, five points behind Germany but three points ahead of their nearest rivals Finland."

Luis Figo scored a 90th-minute equaliser from the penalty spot as Portugal staged a last-gasp fightback to snatch a 2-2 draw with the Netherlands.

Real Madrid star Figo slotted home nervelessly to earn his side a share of the spoils after the Netherlands had appeared to be cruising at 2-0 up with just seven minutes left.

Figo's spot-kick equaliser had been awarded after Pauleta was upended in the box. Moments earlier Pauleta had thrown Portugal a lifeline when he pulled a goal back on 83 minutes to give the home side hope.

Holland had earlier been ahead thanks to goals by Jimmy-Floyd Hasselbaink and Patrick Kluyvert.

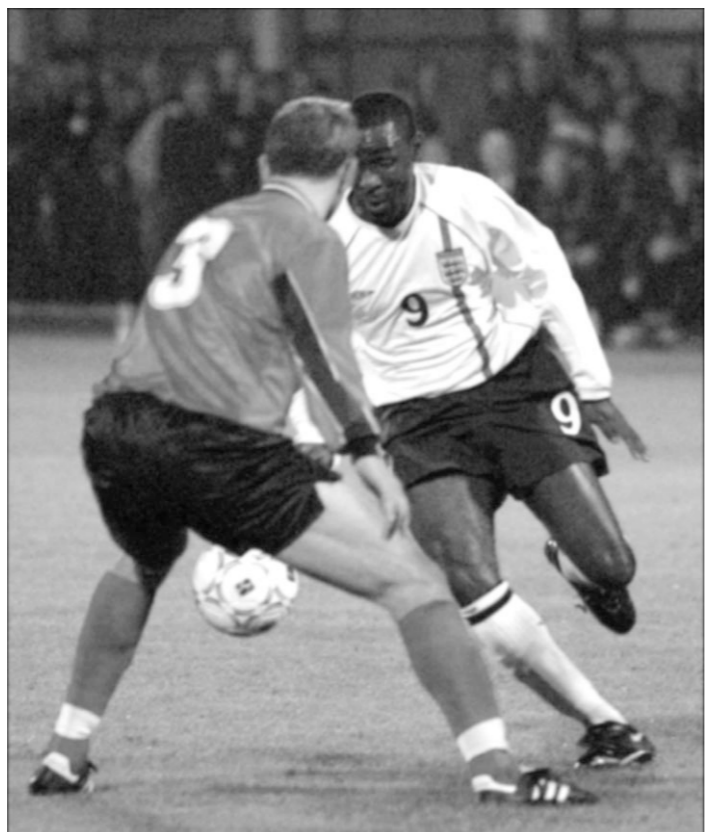


PHOTO: AFP

England striker Andy Cole (R) tries to go past an Albanian player during a World Cup qualifier in Tirana on March 28.

Ireland, 3-0 victors over Andorra, who top Group Two.

Klose's late goal helped 10-man Germany earn their victory against Greece, his second crucial goal in four days.

Klose struck Germany's third goal, after the sides had gone in 2-2

victory yet more emphatic.

Germany also thanked a late strike by 22-year-old Klose, looking more and more the man for the big occasion, for their 2-1 win over Albania on Saturday.

Midfielder Sebastian Deisler was sent off in the 60th minute for

STANDINGS

World Cup 2002 European zone qualifying tables after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four	Group Five	Group Six	Group Seven	Group Eight	Group Nine																																									
Russia 4 3 1 0 6 1 10	Switzerland 5 2 2 1 13 5 8	Slovenia 5 1 4 0 8 7 7	Yugoslavia 3 1 2 0 4 2 5	Faroe Isles 4 1 1 2 5 8 4	Luxembourg 5 0 0 5 1 14 0	Ireland 5 3 2 0 12 3 11	Portugal 5 3 2 0 11 4 11	Holland 5 2 2 1 13 6 8	Cyprus 5 2 1 2 10 12 7	Estonia 5 2 1 2 6 8 7	Andorra 7 0 0 7 3 22 0	Czech Rep 5 3 2 0 6 0 11	Bulgaria 5 3 1 1 10 6 10	Denmark 5 2 3 0 9 3 9	N Ireland 5 1 1 3 5 7 4	Iceland 4 1 0 3 3 8 3	Malta 4 0 1 3 0 9 1	Slovakia 5 3 2 0 7 2 11	Turkey 5 3 2 0 7 3 11	Sweden 5 3 2 0 5 1 11	Macedonia 5 1 1 3 4 5 4	Moldova 5 0 2 3 0 5 2	Azerbaijan 5 0 1 4 1 8 1	Poland 5 4 1 0 16 4 13	Belarus 5 3 1 1 7 6 10	Ukraine 5 2 2 1 6 6 8	Wales 5 0 4 1 5 6 4	Norway 5 0 2 3 4 7 2	Armenia 5 0 2 3 5 11 2	Scotland 5 3 2 0 10 3 11	Belgium 4 2 2 0 16 3 8	Croatia 3 1 2 0 5 2 5	Latvia 4 1 0 3 2 9 3	San-Marino 4 0 0 4 1 17 0	Spain 4 3 1 0 10 2 10	Austria 4 2 2 0 5 3 8	Israel 4 2 0 2 6 5 6	Bosnia 4 1 1 2 6 6 0	Liechtenstein 4 0 0 4 0 11 0	Italy 5 4 1 0 13 2 13	Romania 4 2 0 2 3 5 6	Hungary 3 1 2 0 9 4 5	Georgia 3 1 0 2 4 4 3	Lithuania 5 0 1 4 2 16 1	Germany 4 4 0 0 9 3 12	England 4 2 1 1 5 3 7	Finland 4 1 1 2 3 4 4	Albania 4 1 0 3 5 7 3	Greece 4 1 0 3 3 8 3

Japanese cities express doubts

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's 10 World Cup host cities are mostly skeptical about plans to make up for a shortfall in the budget for the 2002 event with corporate donations amid the country's economic stagnation.

"We have not even opened a gambit in talking about corporate assistance," said Mutsuhisa Ueda, head of the municipal World Cup office in Osaka, the industrial and commercial hub in western Japan.

JAWOC, the Japanese organising committee for the World Cup to be co-hosted with South Korea in June next year, has downsized its draft budget by 2.7 billion yen (22 million dollars) to 60.7 billion yen (493 million dollars).

The new budget plan was due to be announced on Friday.

In an effort to balance its books, JAWOC's branches in the 10 municipalities plan to collect 100 million yen each in donations, mostly from businesses, with the help of local administration.

But officials in eight of the 10 venues told AFP it would be difficult to strike the target.

"Japan as a whole is in such a terrible financial state. We have not even taken the first step in discussing donations," said Hiromi Sangu of the World Cup office in Niigata by the Sea of Japan.

"We thrived with shipbuilding, automobile and electric machinery companies in the past but many of them have moved offshore," said Kenji Uotani, executive director of planning at Yokohama's city office. "Unfortunately we have received no direct economic help from companies."

JAWOC's head office in Tokyo had expected itself to receive about five billion yen in subsidies and donations, but the total should fall short, press reports said.

Last December, JAWOC asked the 10 municipalities to pay up 100 million yen each to help finance the renovation of football stadia to suit World Cup specifications.

But only three of them -- Yokohama, Shizuoka and Kobe -- have so far approved the payment while the others kept waiting for JAWOC's new budget plan.

Now JAWOC hopes to recruit sponsors for the World Cup host cities -- other than 15 worldwide sponsors and six domestic sponsors for the World Cup finals -- the daily Nikkan Sports reported Thursday.

"This shows at least that JAWOC is really serious about the financial situation," said Shizuoka World Cup official Akihide Ishigaya.

SCORE SUMMARIES

Collated summaries of Wednesday's World Cup European qualifying group matches:

GROUP ONE
In Zurich: Switzerland 5 Luxembourg 0

Scorers: Alexander Frei 9, 31, 90, Johann Lonfat 64, Stephane Chapuisat 72.
Halftime: 2-0; Attendance: 8,600.
In Ljubljana: Slovenia 1 Yugoslavia 1

Scorers: Slovenia - Zlatko Zahovic 90. Yugoslavia - Savo Milosevic 32.
HT: 0-1; Att: 10,000.

In Moscow: Russia 1 Faroe Islands 0

Scorer: Alexander Mostovoi 19.
HT: 1-0; Att: 10,500.

GROUP TWO
In Barcelona: Andorra 0 Ireland 3

Scorers: Ian Harte 33pen, Kevin Kilbane 76, Matt Holland 80.
HT: 0-1; Att: 5,000.

In Porto: Portugal 2 Netherlands 2

Scorers: Portugal: Pauleta 83, Figo 90 pen. Netherlands: Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink 17pen, Patrick Kluyvert 47.

HT: 0-1; Att: 45,000.
In Limassol: Cyprus 2 Estonia 2

Scorers: Cyprus: Michalis Constantinou 47, Yiannakis Okkas 65. Estonia: Marko Kristal 75, Raio Piiroja 77.
Red card: Ioakim Ioakim (Cyprus) 90.

HT: 0-0; Att: 3,000.

GROUP THREE
In Sofia: Bulgaria 4 Northern Ireland 3

Scorers: Bulgaria: Krassimir Balakov 7pen, Martin Petrov 17, 78, Krassimir Chomakov 72. Northern Ireland: Mark Williams 15, Stuart Elliott 84, David Healy 90 pen.

HT: 2-1; Att: 20,000.
In Prague: Czech Republic 0 Denmark 0

Att: 16,354.

GROUP FOUR
In Chisinau: Moldova 0 Sweden 2

Scorer: Markus Allback 89, 90.
HT: 0-0; Att: 7,000.

In Tnava: Slovakia 3 Azerbaijan 1

Scorers: Slovakia: Szilard Nemeth 1, 10, Lubomir Meszaros 57. Azerbaijan: Vadim Silyev 3 pen.

Red card: Emin Agayev (Azerbaijan) 78.
HT: 2-1; Att: 10,000.

In Skopje: Macedonia 1 Turkey 2

Scorers: Macedonia - Toni Micevski 20. Turkey: Igor Mitrevski 68og, Umit Davala 69.

HT: 1-0; Att: 8,000.

GROUP FIVE
In Minsk: Belarus 2 Norway 1

Scorers: Belarus: Alexander Khatskevich 19, Roman Vasilyuk 90. Norway: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer 68.

HT: 1-0; Att: 39,000.
In Warsaw: Poland 4 Armenia 0

Scorers: Michal Zewlakow 15pen, Emmanuel Olisadebe 41, Marcin Zewlakow 81, Bartosz Karwan 88.

HT: 2-0; Att: 21,000.
In Cardiff: Wales 1 Ukraine 1

Scorers: Wales: John Hartson 11. Ukraine: Andriy Shevchenko 52
HT: 1-0.

GROUP SIX
In Glasgow: Scotland 4 San Marino 0

Scorers: Colin Hendry 22, 32, Billy Dods 33, Colin Cameron 64.
Halftime: 3-0; Attendance: 27,313.

GROUP SEVEN
In Vienna: Austria 2 Israel 1

Scorers: Austria: Michael Baur 9, Andreas Herzog 41pen. Israel: Michael Baur 6og.

HT: 2-1; Att: 21,000.
In Vaduz: Liechtenstein 0 Bosnia 3

Scorers: Sergej Barbarez 10, 72, Almedin Hota 89.
HT: 0-1; Att: 3,400.

GROUP EIGHT
In Tbilisi: Georgia 0 Romania 2

Scorers: Dorinel Munteanu 68, Cosmin Contra 81.
HT: 0-0; Att: 27,000.

In Trieste: Italy 4 Lithuania 0

Scorers: Filippo Inzaghi 17, 63, Alessandro Del Piero 49, 79.
HT: 1-0; Att: 14,800.

GROUP NINE
In Tirana: Albania 1 England 3

Scorers: Albania: Altin Rrakli 90. England: Michael Owen 74, Paul Scholes 85, Andy Cole 90.
HT: 0-0; Att: 18,000.

In Athens: Greece 2 Germany 4

Scorers: Greece: Angelos Haristeas 20, Giorgos Georgiadis 44. Germany: Marko Rehmer 6, Michael Ballack 25pen, Miroslav Klose 81, Marco Bode 89.

Red card: Sebastian Deisler (Germany) 60.
HT: 2-2; Att: 55,000.

Ecuador zap Brazil



AGENCIES, Montevideo

Mighty Brazil were sent crashing to a historic first ever World Cup qualifying defeat by Ecuador as Argentina continued to run away with the South American zone qualifying competition Wednesday.

A goal from Agustin Delgado on 49 minutes was enough to give Ecuador a sensational 1-0 victory in the hard-fought tie, played 2,800-metres above sea-level at the Stade Olimpico Atahualpa.

The altitude clearly affected the Brazilians who looked lethargic and appeared to be struggling throughout. The heavy sand-based pitch also sapped the Brazilians energy, leaving Ecuador on top for long periods.

The win was Ecuador's first over Brazil in 18 attempts. Victory also preserved Ecuador's impressive

But that was one of the few chances for Brazil, and with Romario and Barcelona star Rivaldo operating in virtual anonymity for the remainder of the

LATIN RESULTS

Collated 2002 World Cup South America qualifying results from Wednesday:

Quito
Ecuador 1 (Delgado 49) Brazil 0

Montevideo
Paraguay 1 (Alvarenga 63) Uruguay 0

Buenos Aires
Argentina 5 (Crespo 12, Sorin 32, Veron 51, Gallardo 60, Samuel 85) Venezuela 0

match Brazilian hopes of a goal evaporated.

Ecuador's goal game shortly after half-time when Kaviedes swung in a perfect cross for an unmarked Delgado, who only had to walk the ball into the net to score. Brazil attempted to get back in the

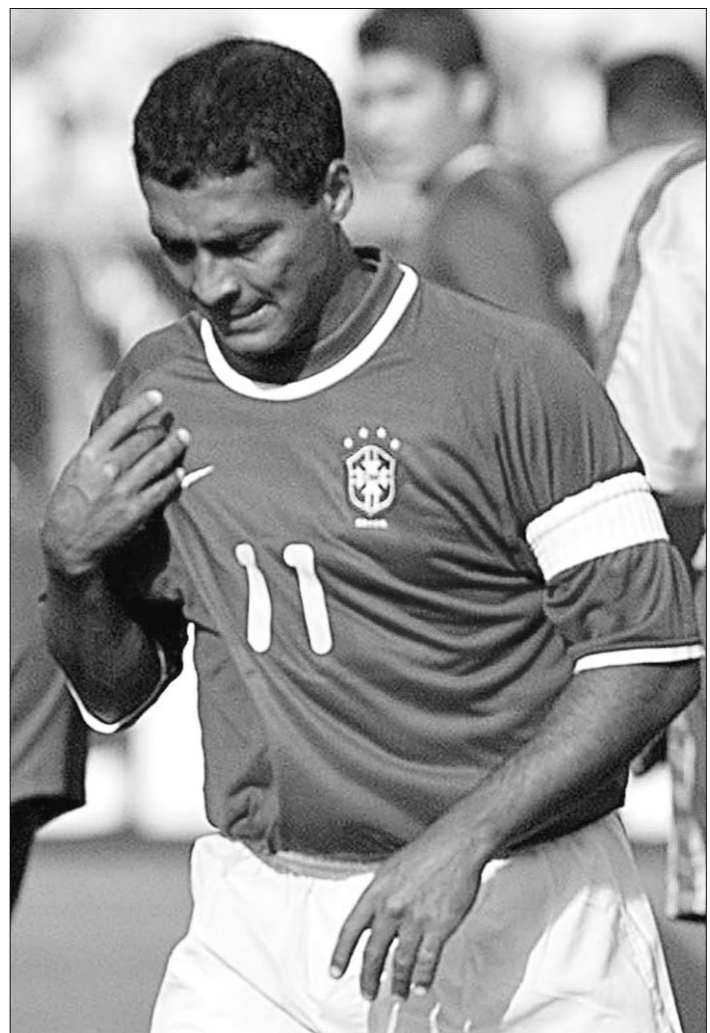


PHOTO: AFP

A disappointed Romario walks off the pitch after losing 1-0 to Ecuador in South American World Cup qualifier on March 28.

record in matches played at Quito in recent years. They have now played 14, won 11, drawn two and lost one at home.

Brazil remain well-placed to qualify from the South American region and are second place in the overall standings. But defeat will heap on the pressure for new coach Emerson Leao, who replaced sacked manager Wanderley Luxemburgo last year.

Brazil fielded a star-studded side packed with Europe-based players but were unable to unlock the Ecuadorians mean defence. The four-time World Cup winners' sole chance of the first half came when Romario was put clean through only to shoot wide with just Ecuador keeper Cevallos to beat.

behind third placed Brazil who trail Paraguay, 1-0 winners over Uruguay in Montevideo.

ARGENTINA-VENEZUELA

Argentina remain a class apart in the competition however and they preserved their five-point lead at the top of the rankings with a 5-0 demolition job of Venezuela in Buenos Aires.

In a match that marked midfield hardman Diego Simeone's 100th appearance for Argentina, the home side turned the game into a fiesta of goals without ever really hitting top gear.

Lazio star Hernan Crespo opened the scoring on 12 minutes before Juan Pablo Sorin made it 2-0 in 32nd.

A superb free-kick from wide on the right by Lazio midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron made it 3-0 in the 51st minute before Monaco's Marcelo Gallardo got in on the act soon afterwards. Walter Samuel completed the rout with a stooping header in the 85th minute.

Venezuela remained rooted to the bottom with three points after slumping to their 10th defeat in matches.

The hard-tackling Simeone, who made his debut in a 4-1 defeat by Australia in 1988, is one of the game's fiercest competitors and may have wanted a tougher match as he passed the milestone.

Venezuela's lightweight team failed to bring out the best in the midfield destroyer, who became Argentina's most capped player in the previous match against Italy when he passed Oscar Ruggeri's total of 98. Simeone was given the captain's armband for the night, when he also celebrated his 31st birthday.

PARAGUAY-URUGUAY

Paraguay put themselves on the brink of clinching a place at next year's World Cup when they beat arch-rivals Uruguay away in a rough, physical qualifier.

The defeat left once mighty Uruguay, playing their first qualifier under new coach Victor Pua, in serious danger of missing out on the World Cup for the third time in a row.

Paraguay moved to second in the South American group with 23 points from 11 games. Uruguay remained sixth with 15 but lost ground on the top five.

Substitute Guido Alvarenga scored the winner in the second half after Paraguay had soaked up endless pressure in the first hour.

Spanish referee Jose Garcia Aranda had enormous difficulty controlling the game, which was littered with late tackles, nasty challenges and playacting from both sides.

The European official seemed to have little idea of how to deal with the unique passions of a South American World Cup qualifying match, often preferring to lecture players than book them.

STANDINGS

Standings in 2002 World Cup South America qualifying competition after Wednesday's matches (Matches played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals, points):

Argentina	11	9	1	1	27	8	28
Paraguay	11	7	2	2	19	9	23
Brazil	11	6	2	3	21	10	20
Ecuador	11	6	1	4	13	14	19
Colombia	11	5	3	3	10	7	18
Uruguay	11	4	3	4	12	8	15
Peru	11	3	2	6	10	14	11
Chile	11	3	1	7	12	16	10
Bolivia	11	2	3	6	5	16	9
Venezuela	11	1	0	10	6	33	3

Note: Top four finishers qualify automatically for 2002 World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan. Fifth-placed side enters play-off with winner of Oceania zone qualifying.

Spanish surprise



REUTERS, Valencia

A powerful header from Ivan Helguera and a superbly crafted goal by fellow Spaniard Fernando Morientes ended the 10-match unbeaten run of world champions France on Wednesday.

The 2-1 victory stopped the French sequence, which stretched back to Euro 2000. It also signalled Spain's first win over their neighbours in more than 20 years.

Despite its friendly status the game was hard-fought from the start, with both sides looking to gain superiority in the congested midfield.

France began in confident fashion with Zinedine Zidane orchestrating affairs and threatening after only five minutes as he threaded a neat pass through to Thierry Henry.

The Arsenal player was only prevented from scoring when keeper Santiago Canizares saved sharply with his feet. But as the half went on it was Spain who began to look more dangerous. French keeper Lionel Letizi had to react quickly to save after Morientes's first time shot on 11 minutes.

Gaizka Mendietta came close to giving Spain the lead, but he was blocked by team mate Helguera as he tried to shoot from just six metres.

The two sides exchanged a series of tough challenges in midfield and just as it looked as though neither team would be able

to make headway against well-organised defences Spain broke the deadlock in the 40th minute.

Mendietta swung a superb cross into the area from the right wing and Helguera celebrated his 26th birthday by sending a powerful header past Letizi.

Only four minutes after the break Spain added a second, with Morientes