

England catch plane to finals

Italy, Croatia, Portugal, Russia, Denmark also on board



AFP, Paris David Beckham rescued England from the brink Saturday as England flirted with disaster before scraping into next year's World Cup finals

Beckham wove his deadball magic to stun Group 9 rivals Germany, whose own campaign fizzled out with a 0-0 stalemate against Finland which forces them into the play-offs.

Joining England in the finals in Japan and South Korea next summer were Italy, who beat Hungary 1-0 in Parma with an Alessandro Del Piero freekick to wrap up Group Eight.

Croatia, Portugal, Russia and Denmark also booked their passage.

After last month's 5-1 win over the Germans in Munich, England had been touted as potential world

beaters - no less a man than former Germany boss Franz Beckenbauer rating Sven-Goran Eriksson's men one of his three favourites for the trophy.

In reality, England turned in a nervous showing at Old Trafford before Manchester United midfielder Beckham rescued them at the death with a brilliant swirling freekick at the Theatre of Dreams - seconds after the Germans had failed to break down the Finns in Gelsenkirchen.

The two draws mean England, who began disastrously with a 1-0 defeat by Germany at Wembley - which spelt doom for Kevin Keegan's reign and a new challenge for Swedish coach Eriksson - win the group on goal difference which swung massively in their favour after their success in Munich.

Eriksson was admirably composed afterwards for a man who had been staring catastrophe in the face barely 20 seconds from the final whistle.

"It was a marvellous afternoon - maybe not football-wise because I don't think we played very well today," Eriksson said.



Striker Alessandro Del Piero (R) is about to take the scoring free-kick against Hungary in their World Cup qualifier in Parma on October 6.

Eriksson saluted Beckham for his coolness and for his inspirational showing.

"Beckham played one of the best games I have ever seen him play today," said the Swede. "He ran all over the pitch and was a big captain for England."

"It was dramatic," said Eriksson of the final outcome. "But you always hope until the end of the game."

As England celebrated there was misery for Scotland, who bowed out despite a 2-1 win in Glasgow over Latvia which could only secure third place in Group Six.

Scottish coach Craig Brown resigned afterwards.

"In terms of my time as Scotland manager I'd decided some time ago that this would be my last campaign," said Brown.

"I hoped it would finish in Japan - unfortunately it won't."

Croatia, third in the 1998 finals in France, won the group after an Alen Boksic strike brought victory in

Holland later beat Andorra 4-0 in the same group but that result was academic.

But the greatest drama was at Old Trafford where Greece could - and should - have buried a disjointed England.

The visitors took a deserved lead after 36 minutes through Angelos Charisteas' angled free and then fluffed a series of chances.

Substitute striker Teddy Sheringham headed England level seconds after coming on after 68 minutes but Demis Nikolaidis scored straight from the restart.

But with time running out, England were awarded a dubious free-kick and Beckham duly obliged.

Germany huffed and puffed and now have to see off Group Five runners-up Ukraine in next month's two-leg playoff. They will play in Kiev on November 10 and in Dortmund four days later.

The three-times world champions face missing out on the finals for

Slovenia finished second after beating the Faroe Islands 3-0 and will play Romania, runners-up to Italy in Group Eight, in the play-offs.

Results at a glance

Collated results of World Cup qualifiers played on October 6.

GROUP 1 Yugoslavia 6 (Slavisa Jokanovic 19, Predrag Mijatovic 58, Mateja Kezman 61, 72, Savo Milosevic 63, 68) Luxembourg 2 (Peterson 37, Christophe 52)

Russia 4 (Vladimir Beschastnykh 14 pen, 20, 38, Yegor Titov 83) Switzerland 0

Slovenia 3 (Nastja Ceh 13, 31, Tiganj 82) Faroe Islands 0

GROUP 2 Ireland 4 - Ian Harte 3, Niall Quinn 11, David Connolly 63, Roy Keane 68 Cyprus 0

Netherlands 4 (Van Hooijdonk 4 pen, Clarence Seedorf 46, Van Nistelrooy 54, 90) Andorra 0

Portugal 5 (Joao Pinto 30, Nuno Gomes 53, 66, Pauleta 61, Luis Figo 84) Estonia 0

GROUP 3 Denmark 6 (Dennis Rommedahl 12, Ebbe Sand 15, 66, Thomas Gravesen 29, 35, Jan Michaelen 89) Iceland 0

Malta 0 Northern Ireland 1 (David Healy 57 pen)

Czech Republic 6 (Vratislav Lokvenc 5, 67, Pavel Nedved 16, 76, Milan Baros 28, Tomas Rosicky 70) Bulgaria 0

GROUP 4 Moldova 0 Turkey 3 (Asik Emre 5, Kahveci Nihat 75, Mancic Ilhan 83)

GROUP 5 Armenia 1 (Hayk Hakopyan 73) Norway 4 (Bard Borgersen 50, 82, John Carew 72, 90)

Poland 1 (Emmanuel Olisadebe 40) Ukraine 1 (Andrey Shevchenko 81)

Wales 1 (John Hartson 47) Belarus 0

GROUP 6 Croatia 1 (Alan Boksic 75) Belgium 0

Scotland 2 (Dougie Freedman 43, David Weir 53) Latvia 1 (Andrej Rubins 21)

GROUP 8 Italy 1 (Alessandro Del Piero 45) Hungary 0

Romania 1 (Gheorghe Popescu 88) Georgia 1 (Aleksandr Iasvili 54)

GROUP 9 England 2 (Teddy Sheringham 68, David Beckham 90) Greece 2 (Angelos Charisteas 37, Demis Nikolaidis 70) Germany 0 Finland 0

Hail Beckham



Should England's players be allowed to raise a glass this weekend, they might want to do so in the direction of David Beckham whose injury-time equaliser sent his side to the World Cup finals here Saturday.

Several England stars were reprimanded by England coach Sven Goran Eriksson this week for boozing in midweek, but the Swede may find it difficult to keep his squad from enjoying a beer or two in homage to their influential captain.

Trailing 2-1 to also-rans Greece and looking as if they would concede automatic qualification to Group Nine rivals Germany, England were awarded a free-kick 25 yards from goal three minutes into injury-time.

Cool as Eriksson himself, Beckham - wearing his trademark white boots - wrapped his right foot around the ball and curied a delightful shot into the top right-hand corner to level the scores at 2-2.

The Manchester United midfielder's last-gasp strike at Old Trafford ensured England won the group on goal difference to qualify for Japan and South Korea next summer and condemned Germany to the uncertainty of a two-legged play-off against Ukraine.

Liverpool striker Michael Owen, who missed the match because of a pulled hamstring, led the plaudits for Beckham who also supplied substitute striker Teddy Sheringham with the pass for England's first goal.

"If you're that good a player you'll always come out at the end of the day as the hero," said Owen.

"You always know what a world-class player he is and that one of these days he was going to take us to, or maybe even win us, a World Cup."

The stoppage-time leveller was just reward for Beckham. He was inspirational to his colleagues who failed to produce the heroics which earned them an historic 5-1 victory over Germany in Munich last month.

Playing in front of his home crowd, Beckham stood apart from his colleagues, several of whom were anonymous for long periods.

Aside from the tireless captain, England's midfield failed to contain the Greeks, who were unlucky not to win.

But defeat would have been

harsh on Beckham, who showed why interim coach Peter Taylor decided to hand him the captain's armband before Eriksson's arrival in January.

Eriksson agreed with Owen that Beckham played a vital role in resurrecting England's hopes of automatic qualification when a play-off had looked inevitable.

"You could see he wanted really hard to win this and he showed again he is a really great captain," said the 53-year-old Swede.

The former Lazio coach was a relieved man at the final whistle. The normally phlegmatic Eriksson jumped out of his seat and hugged the rest of his coaching staff as the home fans went wild.

"It seemed as though it would be a non-day but of course at the end it was incredible," said Eriksson.

"Germany finished 0-0 and then David Beckham stepped in and scored another great free kick.

"The tickets for the World Cup were ours."

Greece, who had previously lost six out of their last seven meetings with England, took a deserved lead after 33 minutes through Angelos Charisteas' angled drive.

The Greek players, who were evacuated from their Manchester hotel after a fire alarm went off in the early hours of Saturday morning, looked far more alert than their English counterparts who seemed nervous throughout.

But former United idol Sheringham headed England level against the run of play after 68 minutes to give the home side fresh hope.

However, their joy lasted less than 60 seconds. Slack defending allowed Demis Nikolaidis time to slot home Greece's second goal.

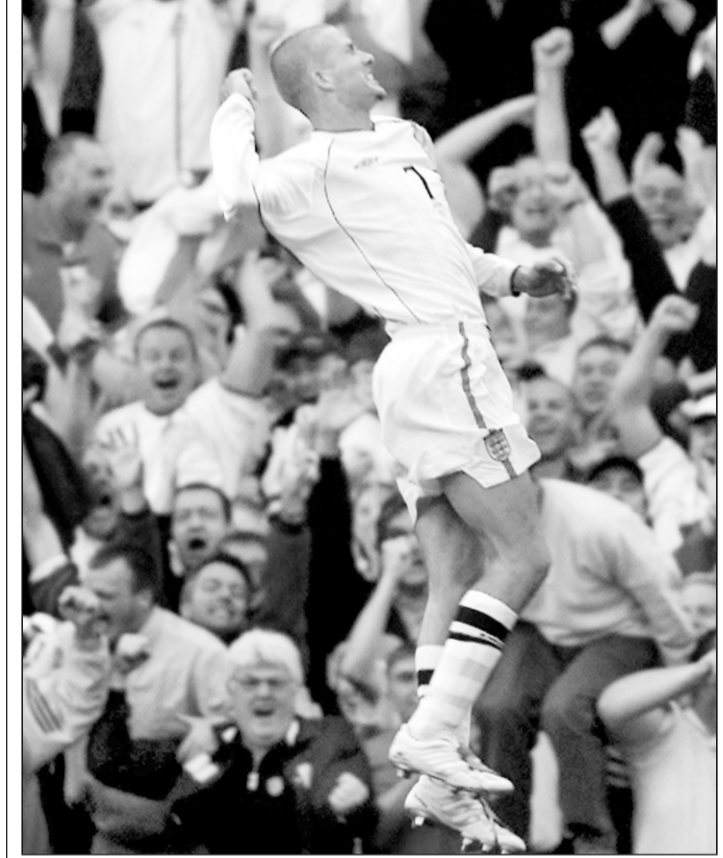
With time running out, England were awarded a dubious free-kick and Beckham made no mistake.

The England captain had a number of chances from dead-ball situations but it did not look like it was going to be his day until his late winner.

"One had to go in," he said. "I had quite a few free-kicks and was disappointed with most of them."

"When I got my last chance Teddy Sheringham said he would have it but I decided I'd take it."

And when the ball flew into the net Beckham's transformation from public enemy number one, after his sending-off against Argentina at France 98, to national hero was complete.



BECKHAM TAKES OFF FOR JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA: England captain David Beckham's joy knows no bound after scoring the equaliser against Greece.

STANDINGS

Collated tables from Europe's nine qualifying groups for the 2002 World Cup after Saturday's matches:

\* Group winners qualify automatically for the finals. The nine group runners-up and the third-placed Asian team qualify for play-offs.

(played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group One: Russia, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Faroe Islands, Luxembourg.

Russia win group and qualify for World Cup Finals. Slovenia enter play off against Romania

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Two: Portugal, Rep. of Ireland, Holland, Estonia, Cyprus, Andorra.

Portugal win group and qualify for World Cup Finals. Rep. of Ireland play off against Asian team

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Three: Denmark, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Iceland, Northern Ireland, Malta.

Denmark win group and qualify for World Cup Finals. Czech Republic play off against Belgium

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Four: Sweden, Turkey, Slovakia, Macedonia, Moldova, Azerbaijan.

Sweden win group and qualify for World Cup Finals. Runners up play off against runners-up in Group Seven

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Five: Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Norway, Wales, Armenia.

Poland win group and qualify for World Cup finals. Ukraine play off against Germany

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Six: Croatia, Belgium, Scotland, Latvia, San Marino.

Croatia win group and qualify for World Cup finals. Belgium play Czech Republic in play-off

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Seven: Spain, Austria, Israel, Bosnia, Liechtenstein.

Spain win group and qualify for World Cup finals

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Eight: Italy, Romania, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania.

Italy win group and qualify for World Cup finals. Romania play Slovenia in play-off

Table with 7 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, PTS. Group Nine: England, Germany, Finland, Greece, Albania.

England win group and qualify for World Cup Finals. Germany play Ukraine in play-off against Ukraine



FACE OF ENGLAND: A young English fan poses for a photographer before start of the England-Greece World Cup qualifier at Old Trafford on October 6.

Zagreb over Belgium, who now head for the playoffs to face Group Three runners-up Czech Republic, 6-0 winners over Bulgaria in Prague.

Denmark made sure of winning that Group by blasting Iceland 6-0 with Schalke 04 striker Ebbe Sand and Everton's striker Gravesen both scoring two goals a piece.

The Republic of Ireland must also head for the play-offs - in their case against an Asian play-off winner yet to be decided.

The Irish, unbeaten throughout the tournament and who did tremendously to push Holland into third spot, hammered Cyprus 4-0 with Niall Quinn heading the second to become his country's all-time record scorer with 21.

Ian Harte, David Connolly and Roy Keane scored the others. But Portugal won Group Two on goal difference after cruising past Estonia 5-0 in Lisbon.

Nuno Gomes bagged two with Joao Pinto, Bordeaux forward Pauleta and Real Madrid maestro Luis Figo also on target.

Brown resigns



AFP, Glasgow

Scotland coach Craig Brown quit his post here Saturday as his side failed to qualify for next year's World Cup finals.

Although Scotland beat Latvia 2-1 here at Hampden Park in their final Group Six match, Croatia's 1-0 win over Belgium confirmed

the first time since 1950, when FIFA excluded them in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Otherwise they have always qualified.

Oliver Bierhoff hit the woodwork but the Germans never looked as if they believed in their chances.

Germany coach Rudi Voller said he had to accept his country's fate and vowed to get things right in the playoffs.

"We are enormously disappointed. We played badly in the opening period and then we upped the pressure and had more chances in the second half - which unfortunately we didn't take," Voller said.

Elsewhere, the Ukrainians drew 1-1 in Poland; the Group Five winners, to edge Belarus out of second place, Belarus lost to a John Hartson goal in Wales as the Welsh bagged their first win in 13 attempts to end a record drought.

Russia, who missed out in 1998, advanced to Group One after crushing Switzerland 4-0 aided by a hat-trick from Vladimir Beschastnykh.

Brown, who has been under severe pressure to quit since Scotland's 2-0 defeat against Belgium in Brussels on September 1, told Sky Sports News: "I had decided a long time ago that this would be my last campaign."

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