

Brazil may book berth Wednesday



AFP, Montevideo

After a tortuous qualification campaign dogged by shock defeats, managerial sackings and accusations that they have betrayed their heritage, Brazil hope to finally book their 2002 World Cup place on Wednesday.

With only two rounds of matches left to play in South America's qualifying group, four-time World Cup winners Brazil will secure their spot at next year's finals if they beat Bolivia in La Paz and Uruguay fail to defeat Ecuador in Quito.

First placed Argentina have already qualified for the finals in Japan and South Korea, while second-place Paraguay and third-placed Ecuador are as good as there.

That has left all eyes on the scramble for the fourth automatic qualifying spot on offer, with Brazil in pole position to seize the berth ahead of fifth-placed Uruguay. The fifth-placed team faces a tricky play-off against Australia.

If the results go Brazil's way on Wednesday, it will help draw a line under one of the most difficult periods in the South American giants' history.

Since the 10-team round-robin group kicked off in March last year, Brazil have sacked two coaches, suffered an unprecedented defeat to Ecuador and struggled to settle on a convincing style of play.

The sackings of Emerson Leo and Wanderley Luxemburgo led to the appointment of the outspoken Felipe Scolari in June.

Since taking charge, Scolari has appalled Brazil's media by abandoning any pretence of trying to

recreate the flamboyant attacking brand of football that was the hallmark of so many legendary Brazilian teams.

Instead, Scolari - 'Big Phil' - has favoured a more physical

among the favourites to win the World Cup.

"We'll be at the World Cup and we'll be on a level footing with the current favourites France and Argentina," Scolari said.

runners up in France and that we haven't got worse since then," said Scolari.

Scolari insists that his squad - which contains players of the quality of Barcelona's Rivaldo and Denilson of Real Betis - has no outstanding talents.

"The boys who have been called up for the last few games are the ones I'll take to the finals. There's no really phenomenal player amongst them but they're a solid bunch who are gaining in confidence," he said when picking the squad.

Against Bolivia on Wednesday, Brazil will have to combat the thin air of La Paz, 3,600 metres above sea level. But Scolari has demanded his players ignore the possible effects of the altitude.

"There is a bit of a culture amongst some of the players of focusing too much on the altitude - its altitude this, and altitude that," Scolari said.

"The problem is not the altitude. Our opponents are Bolivia and that is who we have to beat, not the altitude," Scolari added. "We've already won a Copa America in Bolivia so victory is achievable," he said.

Real Madrid fullback Roberto Carlos is out of Wednesday's game with injury.

Meanwhile Uruguay must beat Ecuador away in Quito to qualify for the World Cup. Colombia must also beat Chile in Bogota to have any chance of qualifying for a place in Wednesday's other fixture.

Argentina, who cannot be overtaken at the top of the group, have an easy game against Peru at home on Thursday, while Paraguay travel to lowly Venezuela. A point would be enough for Paraguay, although they might already have qualified if Uruguay fail to beat Ecuador on Wednesday.

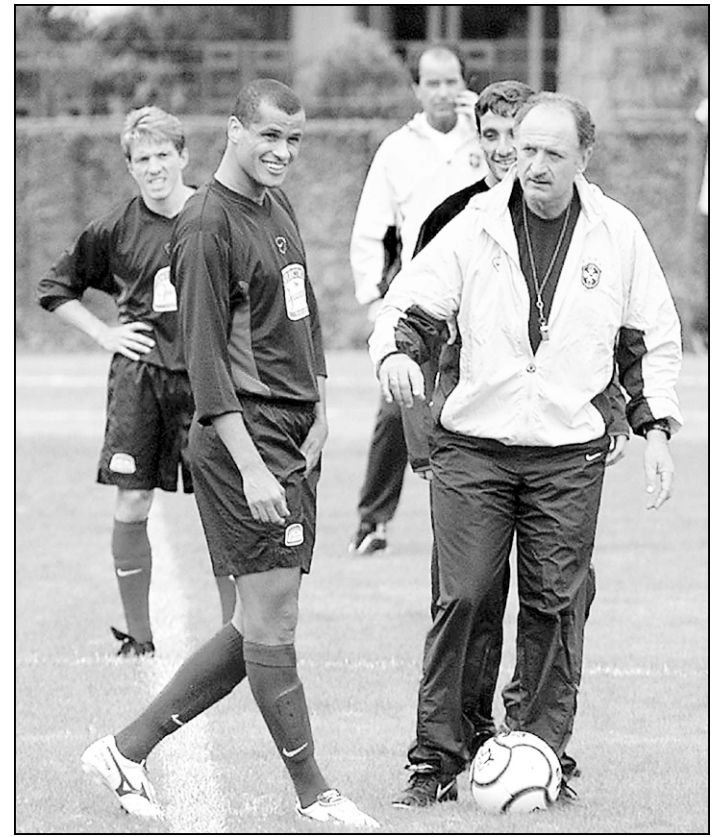


PHOTO: AFP

Superstar Rivaldo (L) finds something amusing while Brazil coach Luis Felipe Scolari directs looks on during a training session at Tresopolis on November 5.

approach, dismissive of critics who believe he has betrayed Brazil's past, and adamant his side will be

"Some recent results have given a false impression of the Brazil team. Remember that we were

Eriksson, Andersson Sweden's best

AFP, Stockholm

England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson was named Swedish football personality of the year on Monday for his achievement in turning round his adopted country's World Cup campaign and leading them to next year's finals in Japan and South Korea.

Barcelona's veteran Swedish international central defender Patrick Andersson was elected footballer of the year for the second time.

Henrik Larsson won the striker accolade for his prolific marksmanship at Scottish champions Celtic and Arsenal midfielder Fredrik Ljungberg was midfielder of the year.

Andersson, 30 and capped 93 times since he made his debut in 1992, had spells at Malmo, Blackburn Rovers and Borussia Moenchengladbach but enjoyed his most successful term at Bayern Munich where he collected the Champions League winners medal last season before moving to Barca.



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON



PHOTO: AFP

AS EASY AS LYING DOWN! Arsenal's French striker Sylvain Wiltord lies on the ground after winning a penalty against Manchester United at Highbury on November 5. Wiltord went on to score a hat-trick.

English League Cup Wiltord flattens MU



AFP, London

A hat-trick from French international striker Sylvain Wiltord inspired Arsenal to a 4-0 crushing of a second-string Manchester United side in their League Cup third round match at Highbury on Monday.

Wiltord's first-half hat-trick, which was added to by Nwankwo Kanu's penalty in the second-half, restored some morale to the Gunners following their 4-2 home defeat by Charlton on Sunday and not even the sending-off of substitute defender Richard Halls put them in any danger.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger reacted ruefully to the turnaround in their fortunes in 24 hours.

"That's football. We should play maybe every day," the Frenchman told ITV.

"We had an aggressive attitude and it made it decisive for us. We had a little bit more experience. We had the strength and power of the adults to win the game.

"Wiltord was outstanding tonight and Kanu as well. In the middle of the park (Ray Parlour and Gilles Grimandi) did well."

United were left to contemplate their second defeat in two days leaving them with just one victory in their last seven matches.

Their manager Alex Ferguson, who cut a dejected figure after the 3-1 defeat by Liverpool on Sunday, said he was proud of how his youngsters had performed.

"It was how you would expect," he said.

"The pleasing thing for me was we kept playing nice football. That's the way we expect Manchester United players to express themselves."

He was particularly pleased by the performance of midfielder Michael Stewart.

"I think he (Stewart) is a certainty to make it, to be a top player," the Scotsman predicted.

Ferguson, who retires from his post at the end of the season, said things would be very different when the two teams reopposed each other in the Premiership on November 25.

"The big boys will be about," he said.

"Maybe we will make it more of a match when it's men against men," he added.

Wiltord testing the offside rule to the limit got off the mark in the 14th minute.

A precise through ball from Kanu set up the former Bordeaux star, who, running at full speed into the box, fired left-footed past United keeper Roy Carroll.

Arsenal goalkeeper Richard Wright, who had a nightmare on Sunday punching the ball into his own net for one of Charlton's

goals, had to move quickly off his line to save from Danny Webber, fed by Djordic, midway through the first half.

Arsenal went further ahead in the 29th minute from a dubious penalty decision by referee Mike Riley.

Kanu went down in the box under pressure from Carroll, leaving Wiltord to fire home his second from the spot, just sneaking the ball under the Northern Irish international's body.

Moments before the end of the first half, Wiltord completed his hat-trick.

Ray Parlour flighted the ball into the box and Wiltord, first guiding the ball upwards with his head, poked the ball past Carroll on the volley.

Wiltord was only denied a fourth early in the second-half by a superb save from Raïmond van de Gouw, who had come on at half-time for Carroll, while United had their best chance just after the hour mark when a deflection from a freekick forced Wright into a superb touch onto the bar.

Kanu then added a fourth for the Gunners from the penalty spot after Wiltord was sent sprawling in the box by Ronnie Wallwork.

Halls sullied Arsenal's night with his sending-off but apart from some determined runs by Luke Chadwick United never threatened to breach the opponents goal.

Visa rush at Irish embassy



AFP, Tehran

The Irish embassy in Tehran has been faced with a wave of visa applicants by Iranian football fans hoping to attend Saturday's crucial World Cup tie with Ireland in Dublin.

"We have had a great increase in applicants," the Irish charge d'affaires in Tehran, Kyle O'Sullivan, told AFP Tuesday.

"Usually, we issue between three and four visas a week. This week we have had 200 applicants,"

O'Sullivan said, adding: "We have been instructed to facilitate the process, (make sure) that the visas are issued in good time to the football fans."

"We have accelerated the (paperwork) process. Normally, it would take three to six weeks before applicants receive their visas, now we can issue them within 24 hours. The match is on Saturday," he said.

Meanwhile, the official website of Iran's state radio, IRIB, in a report from London, said "the Irish embassy in London is faced with floods of Iranians residing in Britain who are eager to go to Dublin for Saturday's world cup play-off between Iran and Ireland."

"The Irish embassy has increased its consular staff to reduce the time needed for a visa - which is normally 10-20 days - to three to four days," state radio said in its web-based report.

Iranians are notorious football fans, with huge and often violent public celebrations after every win or even loss in Tehran and other major cities, a cause for great concern among the Islamic state's officials.

The return game at the Azadi Stadium on November 15 is expected to be a 110,000 sell-out.

The result of the two legs will determine which team goes to the World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan.

Terim out, Ancelotti in at Milan



AFP, Milan

AC Milan on Monday fired their Turkish coach Fatih Terim after a poor series of results and immediately appointed former playing favourite Carlo Ancelotti as his successor on a contract that expires at the end of the 2003-4 season.

Former Parma and Juventus coach Ancelotti, a member of the legendary AC Milan team of the late 1980s, was appointed just 24 hours after he had been named by Parma president Stefano Tanzi as his preferred candidate to take over the coaching vacancy at that club.

"AC Milan announces it has sacked Fatih Terim and thanks him for his work and announces it has given control of the first team to Carlo Ancelotti with a contract until June 30, 2004," said a brief club statement.

Later the club's vice-president Adriano Galliani said he had consulted with club president Silvio Berlusconi, also Italy's prime minister, before taking the decision.

"It was a decision taken during the night in which I did not have a wink's sleep," Galliani told the club's Milan Channel.

"President Berlusconi backed the decision. "I thought and thought again many times about what we had to do and in the end I understood it was the best decision to take. It is a parting without rancour - Terim has left a good memory."

Galliani revealed he had travelled Monday morning to Ancelotti's house to conclude that end of the deal.

"We reached a deal over a couple of slices of salami and a glass of wine. We have not asked Carlo to win the Scudetto but to struggle to the end."

Galliani, who has taken over day-to-day control of the club since Berlusconi prioritised his political

ambitions, did not say whether he had consulted with Milan senior players Paolo Maldini and Alessandro Costacurta.

The sacking of Terim, dubbed the Emperor - a name he has relished since his days in charge of Istanbul outfit Galatasaray, comes as no surprise.

Sunday evening's 1-0 defeat at Torino, which left Milan in fifth place in Serie A, proved the final straw for the club which bankrolled a huge spending spree in the summer.

Even the club's Portuguese playmaker Manuel Rui Costa, thought to be the Turk's closest dressing room ally after a successful spell together at Fiorentina, cold-shouldered Terim after he was substituted.

Terim, in Istanbul on Monday where he was giving a business seminar on management, had already received two votes of confidence from Galliani.

The 4-2 derby victory over Inter Milan a fortnight ago seemed to have bought him some time but a 0-0 home draw with Bologna and the Torino defeat proved fatal.

The Turk also had to contend with reports that the club would have appointed Ancelotti back in June had they known that Juventus intended to dispense with his services and appoint Marcello Lippi.

After Tanzi admitted on Sunday night that Ancelotti was his preferred candidate to fill the coaching vacancy at that club left by Renzo Ulivieri, who resigned last week, Galliani moved quickly to make sure he got his man.

Ancelotti, 42, was number two to Arrigo Sacchi when Italy reached the World Cup Final in 1994 where they lost on penalties to Brazil.

He was informed last May that he would be sacked at the end of the season by Juventus when the Turin club still had a chance of winning the Scudetto but decided not to tell the players because he did not want to destabilise them at such a crucial moment.

Totti, France Fergie's choice



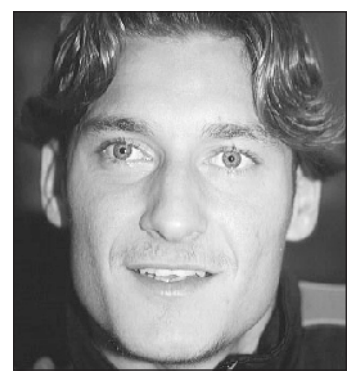
AFP, London

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson believes France will be the team to beat at next year's World Cup and is tipping Italy's Francesco Totti to be the player of the tournament.

Ferguson, quoted by Tuesday's Daily Mail, said France's world and European champion would be favourites and added that England were unlikely to topple Roger Lemerre's side.

"France are still head and shoulders above the rest," Ferguson told the paper, adding that England's David Beckham and Michael Owen were likely to star for Sven-Goran Eriksson's team.

But AS Roma's Totti would be the star in Japan and South Korea, Ferguson said.



FRANCESCO TOTTI

"Beckham and Owen can go to another level, but this will be Totti's World Cup," he said.

"He is clearly the best - and then there is Patrick Vieira and Thierry Henry for France. Spain also have some interesting youngsters, but Raul is the one who stands out," he added.

A question called Ronaldo



AP, Milan

Seven minutes of action sandwiched between two major knee operations. Two brief UEFA Cup appearances before another minor injury. Calls for a substitute 13 minutes into his first start.

These are the troubling numbers hanging over Brazilian superstar Ronaldo, whose soccer future again is in doubt after being sidelined -- yet again -- just 13 minutes into his return to Italian league action Sunday after a two-year absence.

A scan Monday afternoon confirmed doctors' initial assessment that the Internazionale striker's latest injury is minor, a strain to his left thigh muscle.

Still, the latest images of trainers kneeling around Ronaldo's fragile, 25-year-old legs raise new questions about whether the man pegged to be the heir to Pele and Diego Maradona will ever return to top form.

"The most important components of the Ronaldo-machine -- the knee ligaments -- seem rebuilt," wrote La Gazzetta dello Sport editor Candido Cannavo on Monday. "Instead the supporting muscles that had been inactive for so long are emitting little creaks. But you can't section off an athlete. The entire Ronaldo-machine is rickety."

But, Candido added, "I am still among those who believe" he can come back.

That group of faithful has been diminishing over the past two-plus years.

The first troubling sign came during the 1998 World Cup, with knee problems limiting the superstar's form. The experience was capped by the image of Ronaldo limping down the airplane steps upon the Brazilian team's return to Rio de Janeiro.

After French surgeons repaired damaged right knee ligaments in late November 1999, Ronaldo worked hard to return to action. But the knee imploded just seven minutes after his return five months later in an Italian Cup match against Lazio.

Again Ronaldo committed himself to rehabilitating the knee.

Finally, he entered a UEFA Cup match in September, but in the next European showdown was forced out with a strain to his right thigh.

On Sunday, Ronaldo made his return to Serie A action, with Inter facing Lecce at home. It was the same squad the striker faced in his final Italian league game on Nov. 21, 1999 before the first ligament surgery.

Sunday was also his first start



PHOTO: INTERNET

Superstar Ronaldo waves to the San Siro crowd before leaving the pitch against Lecce on November 4.

since the Lecce game two years ago.

Inter team doctor Franco Combi said "tension" was to blame for Ronaldo's two recent thigh strains.

"He must get used to playing again in real matches," Combi said. Ronaldo was gloomy.

"I'm sorry for the people. The atmosphere at San Siro [stadium] was great. I could feel the fans were with me," Ronaldo said after the game, which Inter went on to win 2-0. "I hope it is the next time too."

Ronaldo, a two-time FIFA player of the year, is also hoping to play for Brazil's national team in the World Cup in June.

Meanwhile, the player himself, has vowed to make a swift return to action after the news that he did not tear a muscle in his Serie A comeback against Lecce on Sunday.

"It isn't a major problem. On Tuesday I will be at training to start my recuperation and work again," Ronaldo told Inter's Web site on Monday.

Inter doctor Franco Combi told Italian news agency ANSA the tests

revealed the injury to be a slight pull to Ronaldo's left hamstring and not a muscular tear.

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni has sympathized with Ronaldo's plight.

"When I was a player I had the same problem with the same muscle as Ronaldo," said the former Italy international.

"You can train and play for 90 minutes but it isn't the same physically or mentally as when you are playing a competitive match."

"When I was 33, I had to quit, but Ronaldo is young enough to recover. I hope he returns to his best soon, it's what everyone wants."

Ronaldo received a further boost from his Brazil team mates Emerson and Cafu, whose Roma team face Inter in the next round of matches.

"We're looking forward to seeing him again in Rome," they said in a joint message. "He's a great champion and we're sure that this delay will not cause too many problems."