



THE ODYSSEY ENDS: A sequence of photos captures the emotion during Argentine legend Diego Armando Maradona's farewell appearance at Buenos Aires on November 11. 1) Singing the national anthem once again with the national squad. 2) In that famous all-conquering stride during the game. 3) Rejoicing with teammates after scoring a goal. 4) Sombre, as it is time to leave. 5) Unable to hold back tears. 6) Even 'enemy' Pele was there! 7) The King being carried off the field by fellow players.

Diego's last dance

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona has wept and hobbled through an emotional testimonial match featuring a wealth of top past and present players and watched by his former foe Pele.

A 50,000 crowd was at the Bombonera stadium, home of Maradona's beloved Boca Juniors, to pay tribute to a player, who despite extra pounds around his waist, still showed flashes of the skill that made him one of the best the world has known.

The game featured the current Argentine team, led by Maradona, against an All-Stars eleven which included many players who, like Maradona, had their careers disrupted by problems off the field.

Maradona converted two penalties as Argentina won 6-3.

"This is too much for one person, for one footballer... I thank you with all my heart," he told the crowd at the end in a speech.

Frenchman Eric Cantona, Bulgarian Hristo Stoichkov and eccentric Colombian goalkeeper Rene Higuita were among the former bad boys in the All-Stars team.

Other guests included former Germany captain Lothar Matthaeus, Croatia's Davor Suker, Uruguayan Enzo Francescoli and Argentine Juan Roman Riquelme, who now wears the number ten Boca Juniors shirt which once belonged to Maradona.

The match was preceded by a controversy over plans to remove the number ten shirt from the Argentine team.

Argentina Football Association (AFA) president Julio Grondona announced the move on Friday following a suggestion by the players but

on Saturday, local media said that FIFA had nipped the idea in the bud.

A FIFA spokesman was quoted as saying that all teams at next year's World Cup would have to number their players from one to 23 and the only way for Argentina to drop the number ten would be by taking a manless.

"It was a wonderful idea on the part of the players but it seems other people didn't like it," said Maradona before the game. "It's the law of FIFA, they give the orders and we Argentines have to accept it," he said bitterly.

Pele's presence, somewhat surprising given previous public disagreements with Maradona and an endless debate over which of the two is the best player in the history of the game, gave the local media a chance of some baiting.

At a conference before the game, one Argentine journalist asked the Brazilian how it felt to be the second best player in the world. Pele replied: "It's better being second than

being the last."

Pele, who watched the game from the VIP box, added: "I'm very happy. He deserves a testimonial for all the happiness he has given football. It's important to be present."

But the Brazilian's name was not announced before play, possibly to prevent him from being jeered by the fanatical pro-Maradona crowd in the Bombonera.

The match itself, preceded by a performance from a local rock group called "The Paranoid Rats" who sang "I want Diego to play for ever", was in the best melodramatic Argentine style with tears flowing before and after the game, on the field and in the crowd.

Maradona took the pitch with his two daughters dressed in Argentina shirts and replaced Ariel Ortega in what was otherwise the same Argentine team which beat Peru 2-0 in a World Cup qualifier on Thursday.

Argentina made sure Maradona got plenty of

the ball and, although the 1986 World Cup hero barely broke into a trot, he split the visiting defence with an array of precise passes as he proved that his left foot was still in fine fettle.

The high point of the match came in the second half when Maradona tried to chip Higuita from 30 metres and the Colombian keeper produced a replica of his famous "scorpion kick" save he once produced in a friendly against England.

Maradona, who had trained in Cuba where he has lived for nearly two years as part of his drugs rehabilitation programme, limped through much of the second half, apparently feeling the effects of knee surgery he underwent last month.

Ten minutes from the end, the most fanatical faction of the Boca fans produced their own tribute by letting off fireworks and chanting their idol's name.

Play was stopped as Maradona, weeping

again, was carried shoulder high to the end of the field by both teams.

In addition to Maradona, Pablo Aimar (twice), Lucas Castroman and Claudio Lopez scored for Argentina. Suker, Cantona and Higuita, from a penalty, replied.

There was more emotion at the end when Maradona, who played the last 20 minutes wearing a Boca shirt, made a speech.

"Football is the greatest sport in the world," he said, biting his lip but unable to hold back his tears.

"This is incredible. Now the whole world can see what the Boca fans and the Argentines are made of, the passion of the Argentine people and the passion for a number ten who has made them smile on occasions," he said.

"I have waited so long for this game and now it's over. I thank you in the name of my daughters, my fathers, (agent) Guillermo (Coppola). I want to thank all the players who played today."

Socceroos squeeze France

Football

AFP, Melbourne

Australia gave their hopes of qualifying for the World Cup finals a huge morale boost when they drew 1-1 with world and European champions France in a friendly international on Sunday night.

Defender Craig Moore put Australia ahead in the 44th minute but France equalised four minutes after halftime through striker David Trezeguet.

The result at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was a huge morale-boost for the Australians, who face the fifth-placed team from South America -- either Uruguay, Brazil or Colombia -- later this month in a two-legged playoff for a spot in Japan and South Korea next year.

France automatically qualify for the World Cup finals as defending champions.

Australia beat France 1-0 in the Confederations Cup earlier this year and coach Frank Farina's team again refused to be overawed by the team of French superstars.

After being dominated territorially, the Australians took the lead a minute before the break when Birmingham City star Stan Lazaridis swung in a corner that was flicked on by Tony Vidmar in the penalty area for central defender Moore to bullet a header into the net.

It was only Moore's second international goal.

The score was almost 2-0 a minute later when Leeds United ace Harry Kewell blasted a volley just centimetres over the bar.

France hit back only four minutes after the interval when Robert Pires exchanged passes with Christophe Dugarry, created space and then sent in a low cross that Trezeguet slid into the net from close range. It was his 18th goal in just 33 international appearances.

The French dominated the early possession with almost nonchalant ease, but failed to carve out clearcut chances -- although Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer had



BRAWL DOWN UNDER! Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer (L) holds his teammate Kevin Muscat who attempts to kick French superstar Zinedine Zidane (C) during an altercation in their friendly international at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on November 11.

make sharp saves to thwart first Trezeguet and then Zinedine Zidane.

Australia did not really threaten until the 29th minute when Fabien Barthez had to move sharply off his line to block Kewell's progress at the expense of a corner.

At the other end, Claude Makelele sent a shot skimming just over Middlesbrough goalkeeper Schwarzer's crossbar after a slick buildup.

Despite being dominated territorially, Australia created probably the best unconverted chance of the opening half after 37 minutes when Kewell's precision through ball freed Brett Emerton and the midfielder's left-foot shot was touched over for a corner by the diving Barthez.

The French were clearly stunned by the opening goal and Robert Pires became involved in a pushing match with first Moore and then Kevin Muscat before the end of the half.

After the French equaliser, the combative Muscat was involved in another flare-up after a wild challenge on Dugarry earned him a yellow card and ended Dugarry's involvement in the match with a

suspected dislocated kneecap.

Heavy rain throughout the day made the pitch slippery and reduced the crowd to just 53,228. The conditions became worse as the match progressed.

French substitute Eric Carriere tested Schwarzer nine minutes from the end but it was the Australians who finished strongest with Mark Viduka and Kewell both threatening and substitute John Aloisi having a penalty appeal turned down when he appeared to be pushed by Mikael Silvestre.

TEAMS

Australia: Mark Schwarzer; Kevin Muscat (John Aloisi 58), Craig Moore, Shaun Murphy, Tony Vidmar; Brett Emerton, Paul Okon (capt), Josip Skoko (Marco Bresciano 73), Stan Lazaridis; Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka

France: Fabien Barthez; Christian Karembeu, Marcel Desailly (capt) (Mikael Silvestre 83), Frank Leboeuf, Vincent Candela; Robert Pires, Patrick Vieira, Zinedine Zidane (Alain Boghossian 80), Claude Makelele (Eric Carriere 66), Christophe Dugarry (Sylvain Wittord 58); David Trezeguet (Nicolas Anelka 66).

Dugarry out for months Lemerre left fuming

AFP, Melbourne

France coach Roger Lemerre accused Australian defender Kevin Muscat of "brutality" after a wild challenge left French striker Christophe Dugarry with a knee injury that could sideline him for three months.

Muscat's challenge on Dugarry in the second half of a 1-1 friendly international draw on Sunday night earned the Australian a yellow card and he was immediately withdrawn from the game by Australian coach Frank Farina.

Lemerre said Dugarry could be out of action until February with a knee ligation injury to his right knee.

"Football is not a game of skittles," Lemerre said. "I profoundly regret this -- and I didn't expect this brutality. You have to play with commitment, but not this."

Australian coach Frank Farina said he had not seen Muscat's tackle, but regretted Dugarry's injury.

"It is always unfortunate when a player is injured," Farina said. "It is regrettable Christophe is injured and it was an unfortunate incident."

Muscat, who has a history of controversy, was surrounded by several angry French players after the incident.

"You expect your opponents to treat you with respect and he didn't treat me with respect," said the Bordeaux player as he limped to the French team bus.

Ballack lifeline for Germans

AFP, Kiev

Germany held Ukraine to a 1-1 draw in Kiev on Saturday in their World Cup play-off first leg to give the three-times world champions a psychological edge ahead of Wednesday's return in Dortmund.

Ukraine drew first blood on 18 minutes when Gennadi Zubov opened the scoring but Michael Ballack levelled after 31 minutes from close range.

German coach Rudi Voller had promised an all-or-nothing performance as the Germans bid to avoid losing out on the finals for the first time ever, having failed to oust England in their qualifying group.

The away goal means Germany will reach the finals for the 15th time in 15 attempts even if they only manage a goalless draw in the second leg.

Voller was generally satisfied with his team's showing.

"It's only half time with 90 minutes left but this is a result we can live with," said Voller, who was a World Cup winner as a player in 1990 under Franz Beckenbauer, who believes the current squad is only "average".

"Aside from the opening quarter of an hour I was happy with our performance. But it was one of my toughest tasks to shield the players from the pressure beforehand," Voller explained.

Zubov, a defender who plays for Shakhtar Donetsk, drove home on the rebound after the dangerous Andrei Shevchenko had a free kick deflected.

But Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Ballack silenced the capacity 83,600 home crowd, stabbing home from close range after Alexander Zickler had nodded on a freekick from Leverkusen's Bernd Schneider, making a return to the German side after a two-year absence.

Turkey's impressive away outing Belgium, Slovenia draw first blood



AFP, Paris

Belgium, Turkey and Slovenia put one step into the World Cup 2002 finals in South Korea and Japan when they recorded important first leg wins in UEFA zone play-offs on Saturday.

Czech Republic lost 1-0 in Brussels to injury-hit Belgium, and Romania, who went down 2-1 in Slovenia.

But the result of the night, however, was Turkey's 1-0 success over Austria in Vienna.

TURKEY 1, AUSTRIA - 0

A second-half goal from Okan Buruk at Vienna left Turkey on the verge of a place in the World Cup finals.

The Turks now hope to reach the finals for the first time since 1954, their only previous showing, while their opponents are set to miss out on their eighth appearance.

Okan netted from close range after 61 minutes as he escaped his

marker to fire home the only goal before a crowd which contained several thousand Turkish fans.

Turkey keeper Rustu Recber kept a clean sheet after saving well from a Mario Haas header at point blank range and another Haas header came back off the bar.

Austria elected to play with several fringe players having made the playoffs with a draw in Israel which they obtained when nine players refused to travel to the Middle East.

The Turks must now ensure they maintain their advantage with the home leg to come on Wednesday.

BELGIUM 1, CZECH REPUBLIC - 0

Injury-hit Belgium beat ten-man Czech Republic at Brussels, inching closer to a sixth consecutive finals with a goal from stand-in striker Gert Verheyen.

FC Bruges striker Verheyen scored from close range while the Czech defenders stood motionless as he chested down a deep cross and stabbed the ball past former Newcastle keeper Pavel Srnec into the roof of the net on 29 minutes.

It was an especially sweet goal for Verheyen, who was only called up by coach Robert Waseige after Schalke 04 duo of forward Emile Mpenza and attacking midfielder Marc Wilmots were ruled out through injuries.

The Czech's will rue the sending off of West Ham United defender Thomas Repka, who saw red just before the break for an elbowing offence on Bart Goor.

Reduced to ten the visitors regrouped into a less potent force.

Italian based midfielder duo Karel Poborsky and Pavel Nedved broke often on the flanks but floundered on a well-marshalled Belgium defence.

The Czechs had opened promisingly with Liverpool's Vladimir Smicer seeing a shot saved on the line by defender Eric Deflandre just before the quarter hour.

The second leg takes place on November 14 at Prague.

SLOVENIA - 2, ROMANIA - 1

Slovenia edged Romania 2-1 at Ljubljana to take the slenderest of

leads to Bucharest thanks to goals from Mile Asimov and Milan Osterc.

Slovenia had to do without four of their first choice players including Zlato Zahovic, whose place went to Osterc.

But Romania will take heart from the fact that they dominated large parts of this first leg, though they could yet rue missed chances from Adrian Ilie in the first half and Cosmin Contra in the second.

In freezing conditions Gheorghe Hagi's side took the lead through Marius Niculae, who dribbled past Amir karic to score his eighth international goal on 24 minutes after a Contra cross.

But the Romanians were pegged back to 1-1 shortly before half time thanks to Acomovic's solid header and a full-blooded performance from the Slovenes.

Osterc's winner, a fierce left-footed cross-shot from the left with 20 minutes to go, came against the run of play, stunned Romania and proved to be the winner on the night despite a late flurry from the visitors. The Romanians must now overturn the deficit on Wednesday in Bucharest.

Ireland half way there



AFP, Dublin

Ireland put one foot in the door of next year's World Cup finals here Saturday with a 2-0 victory over Iran in a tense first leg playoff clash.

Goals in each half from Leeds United duo Ian Harte and Robbie Keane secured a precious win that leaves Mick McCarthy's side favourites to claim a ticket to Japan and South Korea going into Thursday's second leg in Tehran.

Ireland were well worth the victory but Iran made them work hard for the result and carved out two gilt-edged second half chances that suggests the Irish might not necessarily have it all their way in next week's return.

Ireland's skipper Roy Keane, who made a successful comeback after nearly a month out with a knee injury, said the job was only half done.

"The lads are pleased but we're keeping our feet on the ground. We've got to go to Tehran and get the right result - then we can start thinking about the World Cup," the Manchester United star added.

McCarthy's Iran counterpart, the experienced Croat coach Miroslav Blazevic, put a brave face on the defeat and said his side had not given up hope of turning the tie around.

"Ireland absolutely deserved to win," Blazevic said. "But our players showed how well they can play in the second half and that gives me hope."

"It will be a completely different game. We will try everything and give it our best. We can still qualify," said Blazevic, who guided Croatia to third place at the 1998 World Cup.

As the first half wore on, the

previously compact Iranians looked increasingly vulnerable in the air.

Iran did give fleeting glimpses of their ability.

Former Charlton midfielder Karim Bagheri looked polished on the ball and the forward line of Daei and Ali Karimi and SV Hamburg wingback Mehdi Mahdavia showed good movement when breaking out on the counter-

attack.

Iran had seemed set to reach halftime with the scores level until a minute before the break.

Iran's left-sided centre-half Rahman Rezaei needlessly clipped Sunderland's Jason McAteer for a clear-cut penalty and Brazilian referee Antonia Pereira da Silva pointed to the spot.

Harte stepped up and blasted an unstoppable shot to Mirzapour's left to the relief of an

increasingly agitated home support.

Just six minutes into the second half and Ireland made the game safe. A curling McAteer freekick from the right was cleared only as far as Robbie Keane on the edge of the Iranian penalty area.

Keane controlled instantly and smashed a scorching shot into the net with Mirzapour nowhere.