

Battle for last spot



Two-time winners Uruguay or Australia will finally emerge from their World Cup wilderness when they shape up in this week's playoffs for the 32nd and last place at next year's finals in Japan and South Korea.

Australia's Socceroos, hungry to break their 28-year drought, will stage the first leg in Melbourne on Tuesday against the South Americans, who have failed to qualify for the last two World Cups.

The return leg is in Montevideo next Sunday (May 25). The Uruguayans, who get a second crack at qualifying having finished fifth in the Conmebol group, have never before had to go outside of South America to make a World Cup.

This makes the two playoff games an intriguing match-up between a one-time World Cup power and a new world football team, whose entire line-up of players is based overseas.

Uruguay won the first World Cup at home in 1930 and again in 1950 against Brazil, but despite fourth places in 1954 and 1970 the once-proud football nation has waned in influence.

Uruguay come to Melbourne with the best defence in the 18-game Conmebol series, conceding only 13 goals, two less than group winners Argentina. Yet markedly they only scored 19 goals -- a fraction over one a game.

The rugged South American defence will be pitted against an exciting attacking force of Leeds United pair Harry Kewell and Mark Viduka and the Feyenoord right-midfielder Brett Emerton.

Australia may not have played in the World Cup finals since 1974, but there is a belief here that the Socceroos have assembled their finest team under home-grown national coach Frank Farina.

Uruguay's defence, marshalled by Paolo Montero of Italy's Juventus, will go a long way to



Mark Viduka of Australia during training at the Bob Jane Stadium in Melbourne yesterday. The Socceroos are to take on Latin Americans Uruguay in a World Cup qualifying play-off on November 20.

winning the two-leg playoffs if they can nullify the skills of Kewell and Viduka.

The South Americans suffered a blow in the last game against Argentina losing key striker Dario Silva.

Silva injured a shoulder in a collision with Argentina's goal-

keeper after scoring the goal in a 1-1 draw which won his team the lifeline of a two-match showdown with Australia.

That will place even more pressure on Inter Milan's Alvaro Recoba to lead the Uruguayan search for goals to send them into the Decem-

ber 1 draw for the World Cup finals. Recoba, reputed to be the highest-paid player in Serie A, only became available last month when Italian sports chiefs slashed eight months off his one-year ban imposed for his role in a bogus passports affair.

The World Cup brings with it a four-yearly tale of misery for Australia, still haunted by the memory of leading Iran 2-0 with 20 minutes to go at home only to concede two late goals to lose out on France '98 on away goals.

Many of Terry Venables' team on that November night in 1997 remain in the Australian team and this time are determined to finally get the Socceroos to the World Cup.

The Australians' performance, particularly the gifted left-sided attacker Kewell, in the 1-1 draw with world and European champions France at the Melbourne Cricket Ground last Sunday was impressive, but this time World Cup qualification is on the line.

Australia have a poor record in vital home World Cup ties -- drawing 0-0 with Scotland in 1985, 1-1 with Israel in 1989, 1-1 with Argentina in 1993 and that heartbreak 'away' goal loss to Iran in their last campaign.

The key for the Australians will be to take something with them to Montevideo for the return leg and keep the Uruguayans scoreless in Melbourne.

Uruguay have the advantage of a hard 18-game qualification process to get here, while Australia have had few leadup matches with their full squad.

LIKELY LINE-UPS

Australia (likely): Mark Schwarzer; Kevin Muscat, Craig Moore, Shaun Murphy, Tony Vidmar; Brett Emerton, Paul Okon, Josip Skoko, Stan Lazaridis; Mark Viduka, Harry Kewell.

Uruguay (likely): Fabian Carini; Washington Tais, Paolo Montero, Dario Rodriguez, Alejandro Lembo; Gianni Guigou, Pablo Garcia, Alvaro Recoba, De Los Santos Gonzalez; Nicolas Olivera, Federico Magallanes.

Referee: Graziano Cesare (Ita)

Romario couldn't care less!

AFP, Sao Paulo

Veteran Brazilian star Romario added to the furore of his continued non-selection here Saturday by stating that he no longer cares if he is picked for the national side.

There had been growing calls for the immediate return of the 1994 World Cup star to the national team ahead of their final group qualifier this week after the triple world champions were defeated 3-1 by Bolivia.

Brazil, however, ensured their berth at next summer's finals on Wednesday when they beat Venezuela 3-0 to squeeze past in their final Latin American zone qualifier.

But the 35-year-old striker, the second top scorer in the Brazilian league this season with his team Vasco da Gama, said Saturday that he no longer has anything to prove and no longer cares if he is selected. "Until now Felipeo (Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari) has not selected me because he prefers a striker who moves more. Just remember that I have a style and it was with this that I have won many titles," said Romario.

"If he wants to summon me, perfect. If he doesn't, that's fine too. I don't have to prove anything to anybody."

But he added: "If I am selected it will be good, for me, my family and all Brazil."

Bundesliga Bayern slip up

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich slumped to defeat at Werder Bremen on Saturday and lost their place at the top of the German League in the process.

Ukrainian defender Victor Skripnik converted a 41st minute penalty to secure all three points in a match where six players were booked and which ruined the return to action after a three month injury lay-off of skipper Stefan Effenberg.

Unbeaten Bayer Leverkusen took over at the top with a 2-1 win at Cologne.

Premiership Liverpool keep top slot

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger was full of admiration for defender Sol Campbell who was subjected to a barrage of abuse in the Gunners' 1-1 draw at bitter north London rivals Tottenham on Saturday.

A stoppage-time equaliser from Gus Poyet earned Tottenham a share of the spoils on England international Campbell's first return to White Hart Lane since his acrimonious transfer across the capital this year.

Campbell almost left with a victory after France international winger Robert Pires had given Arsenal the lead with a curling 25-yard shot just nine minutes to go only for Poyet to pop up to share the spoils.

"I think he handled the situation very well and can be proud of that," Wenger said of Campbell.

"He may have been more tense than he looked but he was also very concentrated. From his first tackle you could see he was up for it and not afraid."

Wenger, who said he did not see an incident when Campbell was hit by a plastic bottle thrown from the crowd, added: "He just played in the correct way."

"It was his best game for us but it is also the fittest he's been since he arrived at the club."

"The game was ideal for him in many ways because Tottenham played a typical English game with many long balls delivered centrally."

Campbell, 27, joined Arsenal after lengthy negotiations failed to secure a contract extension with Tottenham, the club he joined as a schoolboy.

Tottenham refused to meet Campbell's wage demands and many of the Premiership club's supporters felt the stylish England international was holding the club to ransom.

The fans who once adored Campbell then turned on their hero when he decided to opt for Tottenham's fiercest rivals rather than move elsewhere - despite having plenty of other offers on the table.

Up to 4,000 balloons with the word 'Judas' printed were released when Campbell took the field on Saturday and the coach carrying the Arsenal players was stoned on the way to the stadium.

But Wenger's counterpart Glenn Hoddle said he held no grudge against Campbell, a player he so desperately tried to keep at the club.

"Sol acted very professionally, I thought," he said. "At the end I just gave him a handshake and a big smile."

"He did well. He gave the ball away a few times but had a lot of good headers and a decent performance."

Liverpool hung on at the top of



Liverpool's Emile Heskey leaps high to head during their Premiership encounter against Blackburn Rovers at Ewood Park on November 17.

the Premiership while Manchester United won for only the second time in seven matches as they dominated struggling Leicester for a 2-0 victory.

With the fixtures again split over the weekend, Liverpool had gone into pole position on goals scored after drawing 1-1 with Blackburn in the day's early game.

Aston Villa could have overtaken Liverpool but could only draw 0-0 at home to Middlesbrough, meaning Leeds can return to the top with just a draw at Sunderland on Sunday.

Manchester United backed up manager Alex Ferguson's insistence that his empire is far from crumbling as the reigning champions warmed up in style for Tuesday's Champions League tie at old foes Bayern Munich.

United took the lead against Leicester when Ruud Van Nistelrooy headed home a cross from David Beckham in front of a Premiership season-high 67,651 spectators at Old Trafford.

Within minutes, United's French central defender Laurent Blanc conceded a penalty by fouling Trevor Benjamin but Muzzy Ziedler blasted the spot kick wide.

Dwight Yorke struck the second goal on 50 minutes - his first of the season - by heading home Gary Neville's cross.

Leicester look increasingly like candidates for relegation.

At Villa Park, the home side's Juan Pablo Angel drove narrowly wide in the 25th minute but Gareth Southgate held the defensive line for Middlesbrough against his former club in a poor match.

Fulham are on a roll after notch-

ing up their third consecutive league victory with a 3-1 win over Newcastle, who have not won in London since 1997.

Fulham's French brigade combined for the opening two goals - Louis Saha struck first against the club where he once played on a short loan period, and his fellow Frenchman Sylvain Legwinski added a second eight minutes later after being set up by Steed Malbranque.

Gary Speed pulled one back for Newcastle with a 65th minute strike but Barry Hayles restored the margin when he met a Malbranque cross with his head.

Liverpool's match at Ewood Park brought together former Liverpool team-mates Graeme Souness and Phil Thompson - now in charge of Blackburn and Liverpool respectively - who have rarely seen eye to eye.

The pair have not spoken to each other since falling out in the early 1990s, but shook hands before the game.

England striker Michael Owen opened the scoring for Liverpool with a towering first-half header but that was equalised by Matt Jansen's close-range shot six minutes after the interval.

The Premiership's two bottom clubs, Derby and Southampton, met at Pride Park and Youl Mawene's mishit shot gave the home side a 1-0 win and sent Southampton crashing to last place in the division.

In Sunday's other games, Chelsea visit Everton and Ipswich host Bolton.

Premiership's top six

English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Liverpool	11	7	2	2	21	11	23
Leeds	11	6	5	0	15	5	23
Aston Villa	12	6	4	2	17	11	22
Man Utd	12	6	3	3	30	20	21
Arsenal	12	5	5	2	25	14	20
Newcastle	12	6	2	4	22	17	20

Serie A Roma deny Inter

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan missed a chance to take the provisional lead in the Italian First Division when they were held 0-0 by champions AS Roma at the Olympic Stadium.

In yet another television famine - the last three matches held a day early on Saturday for TV reasons have all finished goalless - neither Inter nor Roma looked like breaking that run.

The result means surprise leaders Chievo will extend their advantage if they win Sunday evening's Verona derby with local rivals

Verona at the Stadio Marc'Antonio Bentegodi.

By the time Chievo take the field, however, they may have been joined on 20 points by Bologna who visit Lecce and would share pole position in the event of a Verona victory.

The 70,000 fans who flocked to the Olympic Stadium must have wondered why they bothered in a match where Roma had the better of the first half with Italian international forward Marco Delvecchio having two shots just wide of the target.

Inter's Christian Vieri, back in Serie A action after an injury layoff, spurned a chance to put his side top of the table after the break.

Uruguay not arrogant



AFP, Montevideo

The Uruguayan team Sunday put up a wall of secrecy around them ahead of Tuesday's first leg World Cup qualifier against Australia here and dismissed media claims there were arrogant.

Coach Victor Pua didn't give much away at a press conference here with none of his players made available for interview as well as being non-committal about the lineup he would field against the Australians.

"It's good for us to say we'll try to play the game to win the game," Pua said.

He was evasive about the team he would send out on to the

Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"We have 24 hours left. You could say I've got the base of the team," he said.

Pua was asked about his response to a local newspaper report branding his side cocky and arrogant and quoting superstar striker Alvaro Recoba as saying Australia was not a Brazil or Argentina.

Pua said the two-time World Cup champions had a proud football history, but Australia was a good side and would be a tough opponent.

"We are not like this (arrogant). Maybe this tries to create some atmosphere about the game," Pua said.

"I know there's maybe only one person in Australia who thinks like this. I don't want to put every Australian reporter into the same basket."

Pua hedged when asked about how the Uruguayans would tackle their away leg, knowing a good result in Melbourne would be an enormous boost going into next Sunday's (May 25) home leg in Montevideo.

"I feel I know the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian team," Pua said.

"I will say nothing except we will try to take advantage of the things that I'm thinking."

The Uruguayans trained behind locked gates again on Sunday as team officials try to find a way to get

their players back across the Pacific to Montevideo with the least inconvenience as possible following Tuesday's game.

Compounding the Uruguayans' task of winning over the two playoff legs was Sunday's revelations that they will arrive back home almost a day after the Socceroos.

Australian officials had already secured advance bookings knowing Uruguay was the most likely playoff option.

Uruguay didn't know they would definitely be travelling to play Australia until last Wednesday after locking up fifth place in a 1-1 draw with Argentina.

If some seats can be found on South America-bound planes on Wednesday, the Uruguayans may return home in two groups - with the starting 11 expected to get first preference at the earliest flights to minimise the risk of jet-lag.

Uruguay, World Cup winners in 1930 and 1950, have not qualified for the finals since 1990, while Australia have not repeated their sole 1974 appearance.

In four previous encounters, Australia have won twice, drawn and lost once to Uruguay - the Socceroos' last win came at the 1997 Confederations Cup in Riyadh where they won their semi-final 1-0 before losing to Brazil 6-0 in the final.



Uruguay coach Victor Pua and top star Alvaro Recoba (juggling with the ball) during their team's practice session at the Bob Jane Stadium in Melbourne yesterday.

Primera Liga Makaay powers leaders

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Dutch international striker Roy Makaay demanded a recall during the week from Deportivo La Coruna coach Javier Irureta and repaid the compliment in full, with a hat-trick as the league leaders beat visitors Real Sociedad 3-1 on Saturday.

The Galicians have 26 points from their 13 games and are three points clear at the top of the Spanish First Division from second-placed Barcelona, who could only draw 0-0 at Las Palmas.

Makaay's feat now leaves Irureta with a difficult, but enviable, dilemma of having to decide whether to persist with him as Deportivo's main target man for Wednesday's Champions' League match against Arsenal, or to revert back to Spanish international striker Diego Tristan.

Tristan has been Irureta's first choice for much of the season but was rested after playing in Spain's 1-0 win over Mexico on Wednesday.

However, for much of the first half it was difficult to tell the difference between Deportivo, who have been on top of the Spanish First Division for the last few weeks, and Real Sociedad, who have been mired in the relegation zone since the start of the season.

The San Sebastian side started the better and took the lead after just eight minutes thanks to their midfielder Xabi Alonso.

Chances fell to Tayfun Korkut and Edgardas Jankauskas to extend Real Sociedad's lead before Deportivo started to get back in the game.

The tide turned for the home side with an outstanding goal by Makaay after 35 minutes.

Spanish international Victor Sanchez chipped the ball into the penalty area from wide out on the right wing and Jose Emilio Amavisca headed down to Makaay's feet.

However, Makaay had his back

to the goal and had to spin through 180 degrees before blasting the ball past Real Sociedad goalkeeper Alberto Lopez with his second touch.

Makaay had two goes at scoring his second goal after 56 minutes. His first shot from the edge of the area bounced off the shins of Real Sociedad defender Luiz Alberto but fortunately ricocheted back to Makaay, who didn't make any mistakes with his second chance.

He headed home his - and Deportivo's - third goal of the night after 73 minutes before leaving the field a minute later to thunderous applause from the Deportivo faithful, being replaced ironically by Tristan.

The result means that there will be renewed speculation about the future of Real Sociedad coach John Toshack, who looked increasingly grim on the sidelines as Deportivo moved up a gear after the break.

Barcelona failed to maintain the pressure on Deportivo as Las Palmas reinforced their reputation as a team difficult to beat in front of their home fans, having lost only once in seven games this season.

The Catalan giants were the more adventurous team, especially in the second half, but Las Palmas deserved their share of the points in the 0-0 draw thanks to some resolute defending, especially from local favourite Vinnie Samways.

Real Madrid extended their unbeaten streak over Sevilla in their own Santiago Bernabeu stadium to 14 games with a 2-1 victory.

Primera Liga's top six

Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Deportivo	13	8	2	3	27	16	26
Barcelona	13	6	5	2	21	9	23
Valencia	12	5	7	0	14	8	22
Alaves	12	6	3	3	14	8	21
Real Madrid	13	5	4	4	22	18	19
Athletic Bilbao	12	5	4	3	17	17	19