

Australia-Uruguay preview
Final piece of the jigsaw



AFP, Montevideo

Passions are running high and are expected to reach boiling point Sunday as Australia and Uruguay fight for the final 2002 World Cup berth in a decisive playoff at the Centenario Stadium here.

The last of the 32 spots for next year's finals in Japan and South Korea will be decided by the second leg playoff between Oceania's champion and the fifth-placed team from South American qualifying, Uruguay.

Australia took a 1-0 lead in the first leg in Melbourne, but the Uruguayans' fighting spirit brought them two World Cup titles in 1930, when they hosted the competition, and 1950.



PHOTO: AFP

Soccerer Tony Vidmar (R) returns to the team's hotel after a practice session in Montevideo on November 23. Australia meet hosts Uruguay in a decisive World Cup playoff today.

must win by a goal difference of two to qualify. If the match finishes 1-0 to Uruguay after 90 minutes, extra time will be played.

best to achieve that." And the striker added: "The main thing is to score one goal. In Australia we played pretty well, but we can do better and we hope that will happen on Sunday."

Recoba to grab goals. If Uruguay qualify then the World Cup finals draw in the South Korean city of Busan on December 1 will include all the former World Cup champions -- the Uruguayans, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, England and defending champions France.

Wenger staying at Arsenal

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger has confirmed he will be continuing on as manager of the English Premiership side next season.

Wenger's future with the north London club has been the subject of recent speculation as the Frenchman has yet to sign a new contract.

But Wenger told the press here Saturday that there was no doubt that he would be at the helm next season, although his current deal ends in June.

"I was not committed to Arsenal I would have left already," said Wenger before Sunday's crucial Premiership game against Manchester United.

"I have had many opportunities to go for much more money. I will be here next season.

"Maybe it's because I'm from a different generation but when I give my word it's my word even if someone comes in tomorrow and gives me five times more money. I would not sign players for three or four years and then run away."

And he even revealed that he hopes to match Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson who has been at Old Trafford for 16 years.

"I just hope I last as long as Alex Ferguson has at Manchester United.

"This team have a formidable spirit and that will be seen at the end of the season. We want to show how good we are and playing Manchester United is a good occasion. We are strong enough to win."

UEFA names seeds for Euro 2004 draw

Football

AFP, Paris

World champions France are top seeds for the draw for the 2004 European Championships in Portugal, the game's European governing body UEFA announced Friday.

UEFA will hold the draw for the qualifying matches on January 25 2002 in Porto with Portugal already qualified for the championships as hosts.

The remaining teams for the 16-team tournament will be decided by 10 groups of five teams with the winners of each group qualifying for the championships.

The second-placed team from each group will play a two-legged playoff to decide the remaining five places.

Dates underlined for international qualifiers are: September 7/8, 2002; October 12/13, 2002; October 15/16, 2002; March 29/30, 2003; April 1/2, 2003; June 7/8, 2003; June 10/11, 2003; September 6/7, 2003; September 9/10, 2003; October 11/12, 2003.

Play-off fixtures are scheduled for November 15/16 and 18/19, 2003. Seeds for the draw will be decided according to national associations' coefficient list on the basis of results achieved in the qualifying competitions for the 2002 World Cup and Euro 2000.

SEEDINGS table with 20 teams and their coefficients



PHOTO: AFP

Argentine legend Diego Maradona smiles after receiving an award from the Association of Argentine Coaches and Trainers. He was also given a coaching diploma during a ceremony in Buenos Aires on November 23. Beside him is AFA president Julio Grondona.

Ronaldo will start against Fiorentina

AFP, Appiano Gentile

Inter Milan's injury-plagued Brazilian striker Ronaldo should return to competition in Sunday's Serie A tie against Fiorentina at the San Siro, coach Hector Cuper said.

Inter Milan left strikers Ronaldo and Christian Vieri out of their UEFA Cup third round, first leg visit to English Premiership strugglers Ipswich on Thursday which the Italians lost 1-0, but both are expected to line up together for Inter on Sunday.

Players' strike off

Football

AFP, London

The proposed strike by English football players scheduled to begin in December was called off on Friday after a deal was struck between the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) and the Premier League.

however long we are blessed to be involved with this game." The new deal was a minor increase on the earlier offer of 50 million pounds (70.5 million dollars) over three years which was not enough for the PFA to call off its strike threat.

After winning the early stages of the propaganda war, the tide had started to turn against the PFA in recent days as the prospect of a strike loomed larger.

But that threat was withdrawn with Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore announcing a three-year deal which will see the PFA receive 52.5 million pounds (74 million dollars) over the next three years.

Adam Crozier, the chief executive of the Football Association who also took part in the talks, said: "We have come to an agreement where common sense has prevailed."

Questions were also being asked why, if they were so concerned about the plight of more unfortunate colleagues, Premiership footballers, some of whom earn up to 50,000 pounds (70,500 dollars) a week, paid the same annual PFA membership fee - 75 pounds (105.75 dollars) - as players in the lower divisions.

Fukuoka relegated

AFP, Tokyo

Avispa Fukuoka was on Saturday relegated to the J-League's Second Division with a disappointing loss, allowing former champions Yokohama Marinos and Verdy Tokyo to remain in the top league.

Fukuoka lost to Gamba Osaka 3-2 to finish second bottom overall and fall from the first division. Fukuoka, Yokohama and Verdy had been vying to remain in the 16-team top league.

Fukuoka mayor Kotao Yamazaki said: "It's disappointing that we couldn't stay in the first division, but I believe that the players will come back next year using their disappointment as a stepping stone."

"I think the players did their 100 percent under heavy pressure," he added.

Kashima Antlers, the defending J-League champions, secured the league's top place a week ago and will face Jubilo Iwata for a season-ending championship playoff on December 2 and 8.

Auxerre coach has heart surgery

AFP, Auxerre

Auxerre coach Guy Roux has undergone emergency heart bypass surgery at a Paris hospital, club president Jean-Claude Hamel said Saturday.

Roux, 63, had stepped down as coach from the Burgundy first division club last year after a record-breaking 39 years at the helm, but returned as caretaker coach at the end of the season.

ZZ gets into the groove

Football

AFP, Madrid

Zinedine Zidane, the world's most expensive footballer, said Friday that he has finally discovered his game again after struggling early this season with Spanish giants Real Madrid.

"I was happy to score all these goals but the most important for me was to find my game again."

"It didn't happen all off a sudden. Everyone talks about the last two matches because they were the best but there has been a continual progression," said Zidane.

"I'm happy with my form and the way I'm playing now. I think that in the last two matches I've evolved to a good level, a level that pleases me," said the 29-year-old Zidane, voted Europe's top player for the third time in his career Thursday.

But the World and European champion admitted that the pressure had been great on his arrival in the Spanish capital.

"Personally, I agree with that kind of sanction."



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian striker Edmundo of Tokyo Verdy is sandwiched between a couple of FC Tokyo defenders during their J-League clash yesterday. Verdy won 1-0 to stay in the Japanese top flight.

Collina dives for videos

Football

AFP, London

Leading international referee Pierluigi Collina said he wants video evidence introduced into football to help those punish players spreading the "cancer" of diving.

In an interview to be broadcast on World Football on BBC World Service radio on Saturday, the Italian says: "Simulation is one of the worst things in football. It's a cancer in football."

The balding Collina, arguably world football's most recognisable referee and widely regarded as one of its very best, added a player who dived was not so much deceiving the officials as his fellow professionals.

"I prefer to think that simulation is against a colleague of the player and try to think about a match that would decide a relegation, because playing in the Premiership or playing in the First Division is very different."

"At present if a referee fails to take on-field action against a player who dives then generally no further measures can be taken by football authorities."

"Personally, I agree with that kind of sanction."

Josef vows to clear himself

AFP, Rome

Spanish international midfielder Josef Guardiola said on Friday he was certain he could prove his innocence after the Brescia player tested positive for the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone.

"I am disappointed, but I'm certain I'll succeed in proving my innocence because I believe in everything I've done since I turned professional," Guardiola told a press conference.

The Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) said on Thursday that the former Barcelona star, nicknamed "Pep", had tested positive after his side's Serie A match with Piacenza on October 21.

But Guardiola said: "The scientific instruments say I took nandrolone but the man himself is telling you that it is not true."

Best falls ill

AFP, Nicosia

Former soccer star George Best was taken to a private clinic in Limassol, Cyprus, Friday suffering from an infection and high temperature, an official source told AFP.

The 55-year-old who has a history of alcoholism was said to be responding well to treatment late Friday and was expected to be able to return to his hotel by Sunday.

Andreas Stylianides, the doctor treating Best, said the former Manchester United footballer had an infection in the "gastrointestinal tract".

"He is responding well to treatment and he is to be discharged back to the hotel within the next 24 to 48 hours," said the doctor's statement.

Stylianides ruled out the illness having anything to do with "alcohol abuse or any other kind of infection".

The statement was issued with the permission of Best.

Cypriot Health Minister Frixos Savvides, a keen soccer fan, has taken a personal interest in Best's condition and visited him on Friday, said Stylianides.

"He was taken to a private clinic in Limassol in the early hours, apparently suffering from an infection and a high fever," the source said.

According to the source, tests were being run on Best.

"He is being treated at the clinic but the problem doesn't seem serious, although it's too early to tell," the source added.

A statement issued by the celebrity's manager, Philip Hughes, said Best was "suddenly taken ill" with a stomach bug.

"In order to ensure George's best health interests he was taken to a clinic where it was confirmed that George picked up a stomach virus," said the statement.

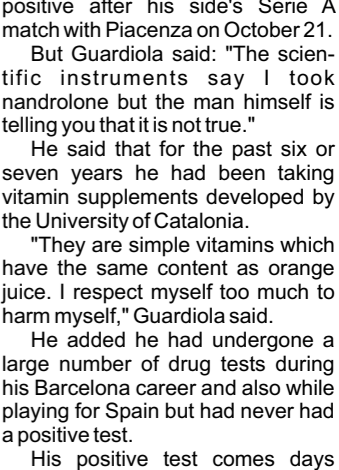
Hughes said Best is "recovering steadily after a treatment of antibiotics, plenty of rest and hot fluids."

"Even though George Best has a history of alcoholism, these past months he has enjoyed a completely clean life, entirely free of alcohol/drugs," the statement said.

The former Manchester United and Northern Ireland star was holidaying in the southern resort of Limassol with his current wife, Alex.

He arrived on the island Tuesday to visit a major golf and property development project on the west coast of Paphos, 120 kilometres (74 miles) from Limassol.

Pierluigi Collina



PIERLUIGI COLLINA