

World champs, Germany impress



REUTERS, London

World champions France began their countdown to the World Cup finals with an emphatic 5-0 win over Scotland in Paris, a day featuring 50 international teams in friendly action.

Berti Vogts was taking charge of Scotland for the first time but saw France race into a 3-0 lead inside the first 23 minutes.

They were 4-0 up by the break before running out convincing winners with David Trezeguet scoring twice, and Zinedine Zidane, Thierry Henry and Steve Marlet adding the others to the delight of the 75,000 fans at the Stade de France.

There was more Gallic celebration as Philippe Troussier, the French coach of World Cup co-hosts Japan, saw his side chalk up one of their most impressive victories as they beat fellow finalists Poland 2-0 in Lodz.

It was Japan's first away win since beating Saudi Arabia 1-0 in October 2000 and came courtesy of first-half goals by Hidetoshi Nakata and Naohiro Takahara.

There were also wins for perennial World Cup powerhouse Germany, but they had to come from behind.

Clint Mathis gave the U.S. a shock lead against Germany after 17 minutes in Rostock but skipper Christian Ziege pulled Germany level after 44 minutes with an unstoppable free-kick past his Tottenham Hotspur team mate Kasey Keller.

Germany then hit three in nine minutes from Oliver Neuville (61), Oliver Bierhoff (65) and Torsten Frings (68) before Mathis grabbed a consolation 19 minutes from time.

German coach Rudi Voller proclaimed himself satisfied - just about - with two months to go to his men's World Cup opener against Saudi Arabia.

"I am satisfied with our effort. The players gave everything throughout even if the team was thrown together rather at random," Voller explained, referring to an injury crisis which claimed a dozen regulars - including Leverkusen star Michael Ballack. "The lads who have been around the past couple of years are a great bunch," said Voller. "But the Americans managed to breach our three-man line of defence and we had a few positional problems," Voller admitted.

Argentina, rated as co-favourites to win the World Cup along with France, looked set for a victory as they twice led against fellow finalists and African champions Cameroon in Geneva but in the end had to settle for a 2-2 draw.

A Juan Sebastian Veron penalty



Veteran Argentina forward Claudio Caniggia (No 9) under pressure from Cameroon's Pierre Wome (R) during their Friendly international at Geneva on March 27.

put Argentina ahead after 17 minutes but Cameroon were level three minutes later when Samuel Eto'o was left unmarked to head in at the far post.

Pabolo Aimar (63) put Argentina back in front with an excellent breakaway strike, but substitute Patrick Sufio equalised with another header from a corner with four minutes to play.

Argentina stretched their unbeaten run to 16 matches, while Cameroon are still unbeaten under coach Winfried Schafer.

Schafer was happy with his side's showing as he puts the finishing touches to Cameroon's preparations for World Cup opening phase matches against Germany, Saudi Arabia and Ireland.

"The pace was very quick from kick off to the end and that helped us. We're happy as it was our first match against one of the big guns."

"We had a few coordination problems in the first half - but we talked about how to correct that and we played better after the interval," said German Schafer.

"We could have won - but it could equally have been 4-4. All our preparation is focused on our first World Cup match (against Ireland).

"It was difficult for me to motivate the players after (February's) African Nations Cup win and I hope we arrive in Asia in a better frame of mind - but I know many African hopes go with us and we hope to emulate our 1990 showing of reaching the quarter-finals."

There were unwelcome defeats for a surprisingly large number of finalists, including highly-rated Portugal who crashed to a 4-1 home reversal to Finland in Oporto.

Portugal, who have been dreaming of the World Cup with the likes of Luis Figo, Rui Costa and Nuno Gomes in their team, were never in the game against the visitors who raced ahead with goals from Joaquin Colkka (9) and Mikael Forssell (27).

Sergio Conceicao pulled one back five minutes before the break but the Finns continued their rampage with Jari Litmanen scoring either side of the break.

There was little joy for Spain either, as they went down 1-0 to the Netherlands in Rotterdam where a powerfully headed Frank de Boer goal after 32 minutes was enough to give the Dutch victory.

There were two other shock results with finalists South Africa crashing 4-1 to Georgia in Tbilisi.

Ivan Kaviedes grabbed two goals to lead Ecuador to a 3-0 win over Bulgaria in New York while Bouabid Boudou was on target in Morocco's 1-0 victory over Costa Rica in San Jose.

after having two men sent off.

Estonia also scored a memorable upset with a 2-1 win over finalists Russia in Tallinn.

South Africa suffered a painful defeat in Georgia where they finished with nine men after striker Lesley Manyathela and defender Thabang Molefe were sent off.

Manyathela went in the 27th minute for bad challenge while Molefe was red carded after 58 minutes for a nasty tackle from behind on Vitali Deraselia.

Levan Kobiashvili (14pen), Georgi Demetradze (33, 86) and Rati Alexidze (84) scored for Georgia while Delron Buckley was on target after 67 minutes for South Africa.

Estonia were on the back foot for long periods against Russia but won with goals from Andres Oper after 10 and 85 minutes. Vladimir Beschastnykh scored for Russia after 18 minutes.

Belgium, also heading for Asia in a few weeks time, will have to concentrate better than they did in Patras where Greece came from 2-0 down to win 3-2 with two goals from Vlasis Vryzas in the last 10 minutes.

Belgium established their lead early in the second half with goals from Bart Goor (32) and Wesley Sonck (53), but Greece struck back to win it with Vassilis Tsartas turning the match in their favour with a 59th minute penalty.

Senegal, competing in the World Cup for the first time and playing world champions France in the opening match, began their build-up with a 2-1 win over Bolivia in Dakar, while Saudi Arabia scored a notable 3-2 home win over fellow finalists Uruguay.

In other action involving World Cup finalists, Tunisia drew 0-0 with Norway, Sweden were held 1-1 by Switzerland, Croatia drew 0-0 with Slovenia.

Ireland, back in the World Cup finals after an eight year gap, also looked impressive crushing fellow finalists Denmark 3-0 in Dublin with Ian Harte (19), Robbie Keane (55) and Clinton Morrison (90) scoring.

Away from the matches involving World Cup finalists and in an otherwise unremarkable 0-0 draw between Liechtenstein and Northern Ireland, the 21-year-old Irish striker Warren Feeney made a little bit of soccer history.

By making his international debut he became the third generation of his family to play for his country, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, who won two caps in 1947 and 1950, and his father, who made his sole appearance in 1976.

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INTERNATIONAL FRIENDLY RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated international football friendly results of matches involving World Cup finalists on Wednesday:

In Paris
France 5 (Zidane 12, Trezeguet 23, 42, Henry 33, Marlet 88) Scotland 0

In Leeds, England
England 1 (Fowler 63) Italy 2 (Montella 67, 90)

In Rostock, Germany
Germany 4 (Ziege 44, Neuville 61, Bierhoff 65, Frings 68) United States 2 (Mathis 17, 71)

In Geneva
Argentina 2 (Veron 17pen, Aimar 63) Cameroon 2 (Eto'o 20, Siffi 86)

In Porto, Portugal
Portugal 1 (S. Conceicao 40) Finland 4 (Kolkka 9, Forssell 27, Litmanen 42, 50)

In Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Holland 1 (F. De Boer 32) Spain 0

In Dublin
Republic of Ireland 3 (Harte 19, Keane 54, Morrison 90) Denmark 0

In Zagreb
Croatia 0 Slovenia 0

In Dammam, Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia 3 (Al-Dossari 9, 19, Al-Waked 17) Uruguay 2 (Forlan 4, O'Neill 59)

In Dakar
Senegal 2 (Bouba Diop 44, Niang 64) Bolivia 1 (Diego 47)

In Malmo, Sweden
Sweden 1 (Allback 28) Switzerland 1 (Cabanias 53)

In Patras, Greece
Greece 3 (Tsartas 61pen, Vryzas 80, 87) Belgium 2 (Goor 29, Sonck 55)

In Lodz, Poland
Poland 0 Japan 2 (Nakata 10, Takahara 42)

In Tunis
Tunisia 0 Norway 0

In Tallinn
Estonia 2 (Oper 9, 85) Russia 1 (Beschastnykh 18)

In Tbilisi
Georgia 4 (Kobiashvili 12pen, Demetradze 35, 84, Alexidze 82) South Africa 1 (Buckley 66)

In San Jose
Costa Rica 0 Morocco 1 (Madihi 76)

In Fortaleza, Brazil
Brazil 1 (Luizao 71) Yugoslavia 0

In East Rutherford, New Jersey
Ecuador 3 (Kaviedes 23, 81, Tenorio 50) Bulgaria 0

France no dream team!

REUTERS, Paris

World champions France may have thrashed Scotland 5-0 in a majestic World Cup warm-up but coach Roger Lemerre warned that the champions were still some way short of being a "dream team".

The French scored four goals within the first 45 minutes on Wednesday and had sealed the game before the break against Scots who were overwhelmed technically and physically from the start.

But Lemerre said: "France are not a dream team. We are a team well-organised and disciplined. We played in a very simple way. But as far as the dream is concerned we'll see about it later," he said.

However, he was delighted with the performance against Scotland. "We had four shots in the first half and we managed to score as many goals. It's something exceptional."

"We played in a very simple manner and we were able to implement exactly what we wanted."

"We were really strong on the pitch. And what we did during the first half was sometimes outstanding," captain Marcel Desailly said.

"The first goal (by Zinedine Zidane) broke the deadlock and it was much easier to play after that."

Inspirational Zidane, at his very best, opened the scoring thanks to a superb 20-metre volley which left goalkeeping Neil Sullivan no chance in the 12th minute.

The game was from there was totally dominated by the world and European champions who gave the feeling they could score whenever they wanted.

"We had a fantastic first half. We scored great goals and we produced a game like we never had before. It was a real delight," Zidane said.

Thierry Henry scored a goal and David Trezeguet hit a double to lift his personal tally to 18 goals for France.

"At first I was a little bit confused to be on the left but after a while everything went smoothly," Henry said. "It's still difficult to say something when you win by such a margin."

"We beat Japan 5-0 and we tamed Portugal 4-0. Every time people had said the opponents were too weak. I don't know."

"I'd like to be left in peace. I've taken a decision to wait three weeks and then decide whether I should undergo the surgery or not. I believe I am entitled to the right of medical leave," he added.

Meanwhile doctor Guy Bellier, a knee surgeon, believes that: "This kind of problem concerning the way the treatment should be carried out is inevitable: surgeons have different opinions and there is no such a thing as the absolute truth."

"I've had a very good game, a very modern left-back who knows how to defend and can attack very well," Eriksson added. "He's not afraid to show his attacking abilities."

One player Eriksson was particularly pleased with was Southampton's Wayne Bridge who played for 80 minutes.

"He had a very good game, a

very modern left-back who knows how to defend and can attack very well," Eriksson added. "He's not afraid to show his attacking abilities."

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni was economical with his praise for match-winner Montella with whom

Ronaldo bolsters Brazil



AP, Fortaleza

In just 45 minutes, Ronaldo rekindled Brazil's faith in a fifth World Cup title.

"I want to start slowly but I remain very ambitious," he said.

"In my career I have always conquered everything I wanted. My objective is to be the best again, I know it might take time but I will do it."

The first step, he said, was to win back his place in the team at his Italian club Inter Milan.

"I thank Felipe (Brazil coach Luis Felipe Scolari) for the chance he gave me, now I have to go back to Inter, fight for a place in the team and get some match practice," he said.

It was a late start for Brazil, who stumbled though its worst Cup qualifying ever with a revolving door

Cup."

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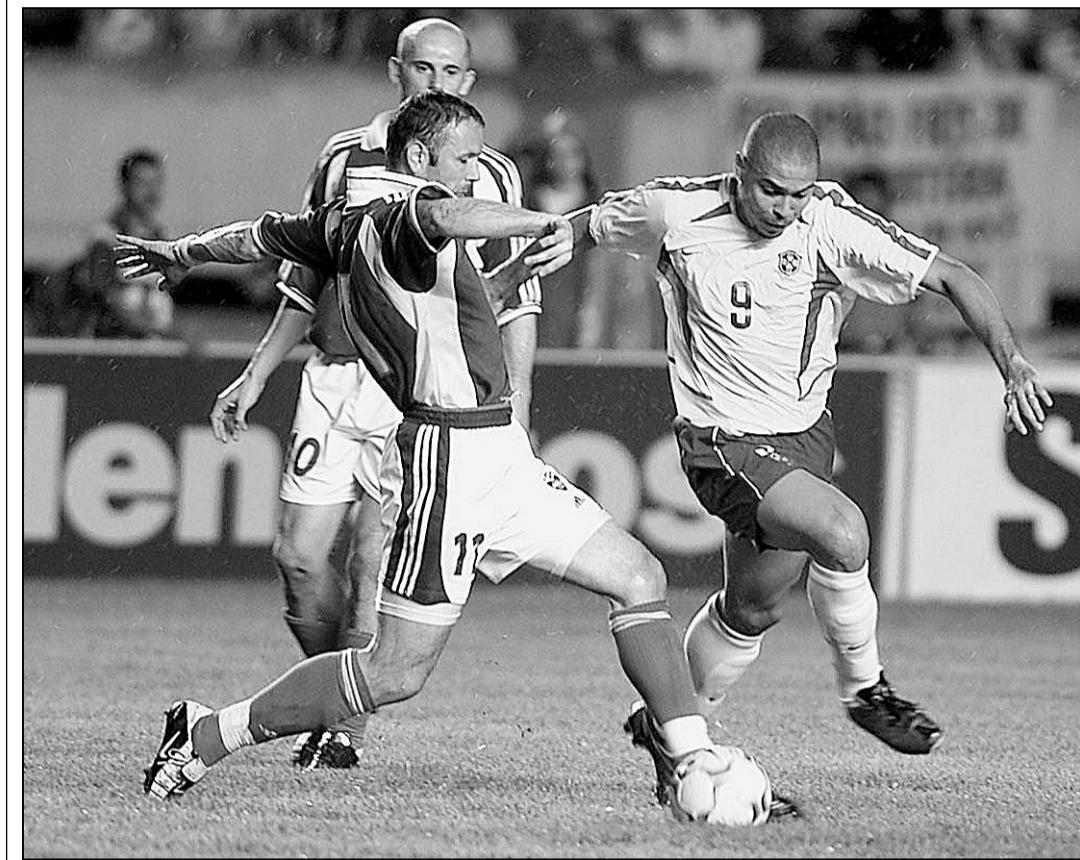
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three times on counterstrikes led by Fiorentina's Predrag Mijatovic that tested goalie Marcos.

In the second period, Luizao replaced Ronaldo and striker Denilson came in for defender Anderson Polga, as Scolari tested a more offensive formation.

And it was all Brazil, with Roberto Carlos threatening from long distance and Ronaldinho, the standout of the team, on skittered through the defense and forced Jevric to make a tough save in the lower right corner.

As the crowd grew impatient, chanting for Romario and shouting "Ole" as the visitors traded passes, Brazil finally got on the board. Cafu lofted a cross from the right side that Lazio defender Sinisa Mihajlovic failed to clear, and Luizao headed the ball from point-blank range to make it 1-0.



BACK WHERE HE BELONGS: Brazilian superstar Ronaldo (R), trying to get past veteran Yugoslav defender Sinisa Mihajlovic during their international friendly at