

Beck crosses his fingers

REUTERS, London

England captain David Beckham is confident of being fit for the World Cup finals, according to reports in British Sunday newspapers.

Beckham's father Ted has been widely quoted as saying that the Manchester United midfielder could even be fit to play in the Champions League final on May 15 if United beat Bayer Leverkusen in the semifinals.

Beckham broke the second metatarsal bone in his foot at the beginning of the month and has been told he will need six to eight weeks to make a full recovery.

"Everything is moving in the right direction," Ted Beckham was quoted as saying in The Mail on Sunday.

"There is certainly some optimism from David that he can make the European (Champions League) final if United get through."

"People have suggested that David is a quick healer but he has never had a serious injury before. But steady progress is now being made which is encouraging."

United, who were held to a 2-2 home draw in the semifinal first leg on Wednesday, face Leverkusen in Germany on Tuesday. The World Cup in South Korea and Japan starts on 31 May.

Genk Belgian champions

REUTERS, Brussels

Genk clinched the Belgian title on Sunday for the second time in their history when they drew 0-0 at Westerlo and Club Bruges lost 5-3 at St Truiden.

The draw moved Genk up to 71 points, four ahead of second-placed Club Bruges with one round of matches remaining.

Genk won their only previous Belgian league title in 1999.

It will be either Lyon or Lens

AFP, Paris

French league leaders Lens thrashed Guingamp 4-1 in the French First Division on Saturday night but must fight it out in next week's winner-takes-all final fixture at Lyon.

Senegal striker El-Hadj Diouf, voted African Footballer-of-the-Year just eleven days ago, twice found the net and Adama Coulibaly and Daniel Moreira got the others on a night to celebrate at the northern Felix-Bollaert Stadium.

Didier Drogba pulled one back for Guingamp in the 68th minute.

Meanwhile, Lyon beat Bordeaux 1-0 thanks to a goal by Brazilian Sonny Anderson in the 70th minute and they will earn the title next Saturday at their Stade Gerland Stadium should they beat Lens in a final-day decider.

Both teams finished the match with 10 men as Lyon's Sidney Govou was sent off in the 32nd minute and Bordeaux's Paulista got his marching orders 17 minutes before the end.

Auxerre, who could only earn a point in a 1-1 draw at Monaco, are now ruled out of the title race and the sole aim of Guy Roux's men this season is second spot and automatic qualification into the Champions League first round.

Shabani Nonda opened the scoring for Monaco on 18 minutes and Auxerre's France international striker Djibril Cisse found the net for the Burgundy team midway through the second half.

In the standings, Lens have 64 points, a point ahead of Lyon on 63 with Auxerre third on 59, and fourth-placed PSG on 58.

Diouf, showing great confidence, put Lens ahead in the 19th minute having been sent on his way down the right flank by Coulibaly. He ran into the area and then scored from about the distance of the penalty spot with his left foot.

Philippe gets Japan ready



REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan coach Philippe Troussier says the co-hosts are "99 per cent" ready for the World Cup, despite lingering fitness concerns over key players.

The Asian champions will be without first-choice goalkeeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi, Ryuji Morioka and Hiroshi Nanami when they face Slovakia in Tokyo on Monday.

But Troussier insisted that the work ethic of his players would be enough to see Japan extend a five-match unbeaten run that stretches back to a 2-0 defeat at the hands of Senegal in October.

"We have been committed to the same task for four years. At this stage the players don't even need a coach to give them instructions," the Frenchman said on Sunday.

"I said after the Italy game in November that we were ready for the World Cup. I am 99 percent sure of my squad and I am very confident."

Troussier surprisingly left Parma midfielder Hitoshi Nakata out of the starting line-up for the 1-1 draw with Italy in Saitama.

He promised he would have another surprise up his sleeve against Slovakia, prompting speculation that he would give a rare start to Yokohama playmaker Shunsuke Nakamura.

"Wait for the team sheet tomorrow. I have every faith in this group of players," he said. "If Morioka is out, we have cover. This game gives me another chance to have a look at other options."

Morioka, who captained Japan to their second Asian Cup triumph in Lebanon in 2000, faces a race against time to recover from a hamstring injury in time for the World

Cup.

The finals, being staged jointly with South Korea, kick off in Seoul on May 31.

Kawaguchi, who returned from Portsmouth for the three-nation Kirin Cup despite a sore knee, could still be fit to face Honduras in Kobe on Thursday.

Nanami has been overlooked for

PHILIPPE TROUSSIER

the Kirin Cup after failing to convince Troussier that he is back to full fitness after two knee operations in the past year.

Nakata and Feyenoord midfielder Shinji Ono are both unavailable for Japan this week due to club commitments, although Junichi Inamoto is back in contention after being released by Arsenal.

"Inamoto has got no problems with regards to his motivation but I don't know yet if he is sharp enough to last the full 90 minutes," said Troussier.

Inamoto has yet to make his premier league debut since joining Arsenal from Gamba Osaka last July.

Troussier may stick instead with Kashiwa Reysol midfielder Tomokazu Myojin, who scored a lucky opener for Japan in the 1-1 draw with Costa Rica on April 17.

Slovakia, who are not involved in the World Cup, insisted they would be no pushovers for Japan on Monday.

"We wanted to play some strong opponents to prepare for the 2004 European Championship and give some experience to our younger players," said Slovakia coach Ladislav Jurkemik.

Slovakia drew 1-1 with Belgium in Brussels on April 17. Belgium have been drawn in Group H along with Japan, Russia and Tunisia at the World Cup.

Portsmouth for the three-nation Kirin Cup despite a sore knee, could still be fit to face Honduras in Kobe on Thursday.

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the towel in the race for the Premiership crown.

Asked whether the Merseysiders are out of contention the Frenchman replied: "No, you never know. In football you never know."

"And sometimes you can have different situations and different outcomes."

"It's not the best result for us but I cannot fault my players for their effort. Right to the end they tried to come back into the game."

"At half-time maybe we should have been 2-0 up and unfortunately we didn't score."

"We were up for it, but all in all it was not a good day for Liverpool."

Elsewhere, Newcastle celebrated a successful week which saw them secure their place in next season's Champions League with a



Manchester United's Ole Gunnar Solskjær (R) tries to keep control against Ipswich Town's Hermann Hreidarsson during their English Premiership match on Saturday.

3-1 win over West Ham at St James' Park.

Hammers' talented young striker Jermain Defoe almost spoilt the party for the Magpies when he put the Londoners 1-0 up after 20 minutes, before Newcastle hit back through Alan Shearer, Lomana LuaLua and Laurent Robert.

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