

Eagles fly at Landsdowne



REUTERS, Dublin

Nigeria ruined Ireland's pre-World Cup send-off on Thursday, beating the home side 2-1 in a friendly international at Landsdowne Road.

A capacity crowd of over 42,600 had turned out for a last chance to see Mick McCarthy's team before they depart for Saipan on Friday morning, but it was the visitors who gave their World Cup preparations a boost, punishing Irish defensive lapses with goals from Julius Aghahowa and Efe Sodje.

Stephen Reid, a late call up to the Ireland squad after the withdrawal through injury of Mark Kennedy, pulled a goal back, and a late Mark Kinsella effort was disallowed.

McCarthy began the game with the team he is likely to pick for Ireland's opening World Cup tie against Cameroon, with the main talking point his decision to partner Matt Holland rather than Kinsella alongside captain Roy Keane in central midfield.

The home side made most of the early running, but it was Nigeria who struck the first blow after 13 minutes.

A lovely, lofted pass from Austin "jay jay" Okacha in the Nigerian midfield split the Irish defence wide open, and Aghahowa raced through to calmly slot the ball past Shay Given.

Ireland continued to create chances, with first a Robbie Keane header and then a thunderous shot from Holland forcing saves from Ike Shorunmu in the Nigerian goal.

Just before halftime Robbie Keane should have equalised. A

cross from Jason McAteer on the right flank found the Leeds United striker unmarked on the edge of the six yard box, but his header was misdirected and passed wide of Shorunmu's left hand post.

Barely a minute into the second half Nigeria were further in front. Lax marking at a corner gave Sodje a free header at the back post, and the right-back made no mistake.

As the second half wore on McCarthy made a string of substitutions, and his side struggled to find fluency.

But it was one of the replacements, Millwalls's Reid, who gave the Irish some hope in the 68th minute, cutting in from the right flank and dancing through the Nigerian defence before unleashing a left footed shot into the top corner of the goal.

Ireland continued to press, and three minutes from the end another substitute, Charlton midfielder Kinsella found the net, only to see the goal ruled out by the Portuguese referee for offside.

McCarthy said: "We had chance after chance. I think we deserved an equaliser. We should have won that game. Overall I'm very pleased with the performance but disappointed with the result.

"Hopefully, we can play as well as that in the World Cup and get results."

Ireland face African Nations Cup winners Cameroon as well as Germany and Saudi Arabia in group E.

"It's shown us that Cameroon aren't (going to be) any mugs. I think they are better than Nigeria," said McCarthy.

Nigeria are drawn in Group F, along with Argentina, England and Sweden



Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba (L) loses his balance while fighting for the ball with China's Li Weifeng during their pre-World Cup warm-up match in Shenyang, capital of China's northeastern province of Liaoning, on May 16.

Uruguay crash China party



REUTERS, Shenyang, China

Striker Sebastian Abreu struck two late goals on Thursday as Uruguay won 2-0 to ruin China's return to the football-crazy town where they claimed their first World Cup finals berth last year.

Tribes of drum-beating fans, their faces covered in patriotic red paint, had converged on Wulihe Stadium in the blue-collar northeastern industrial hub hoping for an encore of the fireworks party that followed the history-making 1-0 win over Oman in a World Cup qualifier last October.

But a downpour late in the first half drove many of the 40,000-odd hometown supporters from their seats and helped wash away early Chinese momentum in the World Cup warm-up.

It was therefore a quiet night for scores of riot police at the stadium, where state media said 20 percent of the tickets were destroyed this week out of concerns over crowd control.

China strung together some well-constructed moves and piled on the pressure with a series of early shots at goal but were worn down by the quick passing of their South American opponents, and ultimately beaten by Abreu's finishing.

The striker's goals were a relief to Uruguay coach Victor Pua, who on Sunday had watched U.S. goalkeeper Brad Friedel turn back a relentless attack with a string of dazzling saves in Uruguay's 2-1 defeat in Washington.

On Thursday Uruguay's attack enjoyed a better return for their efforts. "We missed some opportunities in the first half but in the second we were more efficient," said the coach.

China coach Bora Milutinovic was upbeat about his team's play early in the match, but the supporters' favourite, apologetic to local backers for the outcome.

"I feel very sorry we couldn't bring

the fans happiness," he said.

Milutinovic, who substituted 10 of the 11 players who started the match, attributed his team's defensive frailty in the game's closing minutes to an attitude problem.

"We don't play a team as strong as Uruguay every day," he said.

Abreu drew first blood in the 74th minute when he hammered a low, left-footed shot into the bottom right hand corner from the edge of the penalty area after a beautifully-constructed move involving six players.

Just 13 minutes later, the lanky striker beat An Qi again when he picked up a superb cross from Manchester United's Diego Forlan from the right and fired home from just outside the box.

Abreu, who plays for Cruz Azul in Mexico, also found the net on 42 minutes but was robbed of a hat-trick by a controversial offside ruling. A television replay showed he was just inside.

It was the second time in as many games that an offside call had cancelled out a goal for Abreu, who has proved dangerous in the absence of Malaga's Dario Silva.

China, looking to better a sluggish 3-1 win over a young Thailand side on Saturday, waited patiently for their chances and were firm in the tackle during the early stages.

Dundee defender Fan Zhiyi twisted his ankle trying to tackle Abreu and had to come off in 29th minute but Milutinovic said the injury did not appear serious.

Striker Yang Chen, in his first match since returning from Eintracht Frankfurt, gathered a floating cross from midfielder Li Xiaopeng on the half-hour mark and fed charging midfielder and captain Ma Mingyu, whose near-post strike was just wide.

But China had a lucky escape when a low shot from Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba of Inter Milan hit the post.

China continue their World Cup warm-up schedule against PSV Eindhoven in Shanghai on May 19. Uruguay are due to play another friendly against Singapore on May 21.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Brazil's Denilson jumps to avoid a sliding tackle from a Espanyol reserve team defender during a training match in Barcelona yesterday.

Ronaldo quietly confident

INTERNET, Barcelona

Inter FC Brazilian international forward Ronaldo is optimistic about Brazil's chances in the 2002 World Cup, although he acknowledges the tournament will be a "very tough test" after what has been a difficult year for himself and the team, the EFE News Agency stated.

The superstar announced: "I am optimistic and believe we can play well at the World Cup.

It does not bother me that people think we are not among the favourites, because we are going to work hard to win the World Cup."

Ronaldo acknowledged that the team's rivals in the first round - China, Turkey and Costa Rica - are not as tough as others, but said Brazil should concentrate on its own play, not that of its opponents.

"We have to try and make it better than the last World Cup in France, which was good, but we lost in the finals," Ronaldo said and added that Brazil's friendly against Cataluña on Saturday will be "very complicated."

"I know Celades, Roger, Oscar ... it will be tougher than I thought because Cataluña has great players and I am sure it will be a great game," Ronaldo said.

Mexico end well

INTERNET, San Francisco

Mexico edged Bolivia 1-0 in their final warm-up game before heading to the World Cup.

Half-time substitute Juan Francisco Palencia scored the only goal of the game in the 47th minute before a crowd of 37,217 at Candlestick Park.

Cuahtemoc Blanco passed down the left to Palencia, who sliced between two defenders and beat Bolivian goalkeeper Carlos Eguez.

Eight minutes later, Blanco had a chance to double Mexico's advantage, striking through a crowded penalty area.

The ball bobbed but Eguez managed to control it.

Bolivia's best chance came in the 16th minute when Augusto Andaveris had a "goal" disallowed after he was ruled offside.

Another chance came with eight minutes remaining when Ruben Tufino, who played at the University of South Carolina, fired a 36-meter free-kick wide of the Mexican goal.

Henry a Cisse fan

AFP, Clairefontaine

France star Thierry Henry admits he can't wait to see exciting prospect Djibril Cisse make his debut for the world champions.

France's top scorer this season with 22 goals in 29 games, Cisse blasted his way into Les Bleus' World Cup squad ahead of Nicolas Anelka with some scintillating displays for Auxerre.

The 20-year-old prodigy has attracted interest from several big-spending European clubs, with Auxerre manager Guy Roux reportedly slapping a 30 million pounds price-tag on his young star.

Arsenal sharpshooter Henry - a topscorer himself in the English Premiership this year - is unsurprised that Cisse is one of the hottest properties in French football.

"Djibril has had an extraordinary season with Auxerre," Henry said here Thursday as France prepared to face Belgium at the weekend before heading to the Far East on Sunday.

"If he can do for France what he's been doing with Auxerre it will be a big boost," Henry added, himself still very much one of the younger members of France's squad at 24.

"He's been phenomenal this year, you just couldn't ignore him," added Henry who is struggling with a minor knee injury which looks like ruling him out of Saturday's friendly match against Belgium in Paris.

Germany seek a lift



REUTERS, Leverkusen

Troubled Germany could do with a morale-boosting victory when they play Austria in their final World Cup warm-up game.

The triple world champions have faced a wave of criticism following their embarrassing 1-0 defeat by Wales on Tuesday in Cardiff.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Germany's Sebastian Dierling obliging his little fans after a news conference held by the national soccer team in Troisdorf near Cologne yesterday.

"We want an absolutely positive result before we travel to the World Cup," Germany head coach Rudi Voeller said. "That will take some of the pressure off. I told the players that and they realise they have to beat Austria.

"I am naturally aware that our last game wasn't good but I can assure you that you will see a Germany team with a totally different attitude this time."

Germany's injury problems have mounted in the build-up to the Austria friendly in Leverkusen, with Borussia Dortmund defender Christian Woerns being ruled out of the World Cup with a knee injury.

Voeller, already without experienced central defender Jens Nowotny and midfielder Mehmet Scholl for the tournament, has been unable to field his best team in recent matches.

The German clubs' crowded schedule has taken its toll, with some of Voeller's key men still unavailable with the start of the World Cup only two weeks away.

Players from the Bayer Leverkusen side who lost 2-1 to Real Madrid in Wednesday's Champions League final, most notably midfield artist Michael Ballack, have been included in the

There was some good news for the former international striker ahead of Saturday's match as he can welcome back Hertha Berlin wingback Marko Rehmer, who had been sidelined for weeks with an ankle injury.

Former Germany captain Oliver Bierhoff should start or come on at some stage in what could be his last match for his country on home soil. He has said he might end his playing career after the World Cup.

Austria coach Hans Krankl has fond memories of playing Germany as he scored two goals in a memorable 3-2 win over their neighbours in the second group stage of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina.

"That was the greatest moment in my whole life," said the former striker, whose team did not qualify for this year's finals. "I could talk about it all the time."

But Krankl, who will be without injured veteran striker Ivica Vastic, is not expecting a repeat of that achievement.

"We are the opponents that Germany need to restore their self-confidence," he said. "Their defeat to Wales was the worst thing that could happen to us. Cordoba will not help us this time."

Dyer making rapid progress



INTERNET, Dubai

Kieron Dyer could be fit to play in England's World Cup opener against Sweden on 2 June, according to Newcastle boss Bobby Robson, as the midfielder continues to make a rapid recovery from a knee injury.

Dyer is making excellent progress according to Robson, who said: "Our medical staff believe he is 10 days away from playing - that's playing, not training - and that wouldn't rule him out of England's plans.

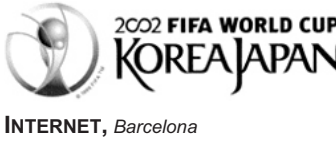
'His knee looks fine and has improved dramatically. He is swimming and jogging and his knee is holding firm. He's not in discomfort and he's making excellent progress.'

Dyer had been told he needed a miracle to make the tournament but could yet be named in Sven-Goran Eriksson's final squad on 21 May.

Robson said: 'Now it's up to England to look at him and analyse the situation. I spoke to Sven and (Football Association chief executive) Adam Crozier and passed all that information on to them.

"They are going to try to get hold of our physios so they can make their assessment but our people are very optimistic and so is Kieron."

Brazil blaze



INTERNET, Barcelona

Brazil gained a 5-0 victory over the reserve team of Spanish first-division side Espanyol in a low-tempo training match Thursday at the Luis Companys stadium.

Brazil forwards Edilson and Ronaldinho each scored two times, and Kaka netted once, even though the four-time World Cup winner failed to exert itself before a sprinkling of spectators at the venue which hosted the 1992 Olympic Games.

Lacking Real Madrid's Roberto Carlos, Bayer Leverkusen's Lucio, Gremio's Anderson Polga and Corinthians' Dida and Vampeta all yet to join the squad as well as Barcelona's injured star forward Rivaldo, coach Luiz Felipe Scolari utilised all his remaining 17 players during the encounter.

Scolari began the match with

Inter's Ronaldo and Cruzeiro's Edilson in attack against the local side, which plays in Spain's regionally-organised Third Division.

Ronaldo, who returned to action two months ago after two right knee ligament operations, spurned a clear goal chance in the 13th minute.

Brazil eventually made their class tell in the 41st minute when Edilson crowned a flowing move to score the opening goal.

The half-time introductions of Kaka and the more experienced Juninho Paulista, who had two spells in Spain with Atletico de Madrid, livened up the pace a little although Ronaldo missed a second good opportunity in the 55th minute.

The second goal of the South American team came through Kaka in the 61st minute and, after Ronaldo had been substituted in the 70th minute, Ronaldinho headed his side's third.

The Paris Saint Germain player nodded in again 10 minutes later and Edilson netted the fifth in the dying moments as Espanyol finally

caved in.

Brazil meets a Catalan representative side in an exhibition match on Saturday at Camp Nou stadium before going on to play Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur on May 25.

Meanwhile, Scolari is calling for his team to improve its off-the-ball play before the World Cup.

Scolari would like to see his forwards apply more pressure on the opposition in the final third, forcing play and maybe more:

"We have to improve the positioning when the adversary is clearing...We have to make our opponents feel this marking pressure."

Emerson backs his coach's sentiments:

"With the ball, the Brazilian 'Seleção' knows how to play. But we also have to learn to play without the ball...The coach is harping on this aspect, because everyone knows it is a weak point which we need to improve sufficiently."

Scolari's players kick off the World Cup against Turkey in South Korea on June 3. Brazil also plays China and Costa Rica.

More Rivaldo assurances



REUTERS, Barcelona

Brazil's doctor again tried to dispel worries over the fitness of striker Rivaldo on Thursday, saying that the Barcelona striker was certain to play at the World Cup despite his troublesome knee.

Rivaldo, who missed both legs of the Champions League semifinal against Real Madrid, has been training on his own since joining Brazil's World Cup squad in Barcelona on Monday.

Team doctor Jose Luis Runco said Rivaldo would not play in Saturday's game against a Catalan XI but would be ready to face Malaysia in the following Saturday's friendly international in Kuala Lumpur.

"Rivaldo's presence in the game against Malaysia and at the World Cup is as certain as his absence in the game against Catalonia," Runco said.

Central defender Lucio, who limped off in the last minute of Bayer Leverkusen's 2-1 Champions League final defeat by Real Madrid, said that his injury was nothing more than a scare.

Lucio told the Rio de Janeiro daily O Globo that it was nothing worse than a twisted ankle.

"It hurts a bit but it's nothing that is going to bring problems," he said. "It was just a fright."

Lucio is due to join his Brazil teammates on Friday but, like Rivaldo, will be rested against Catalonia.

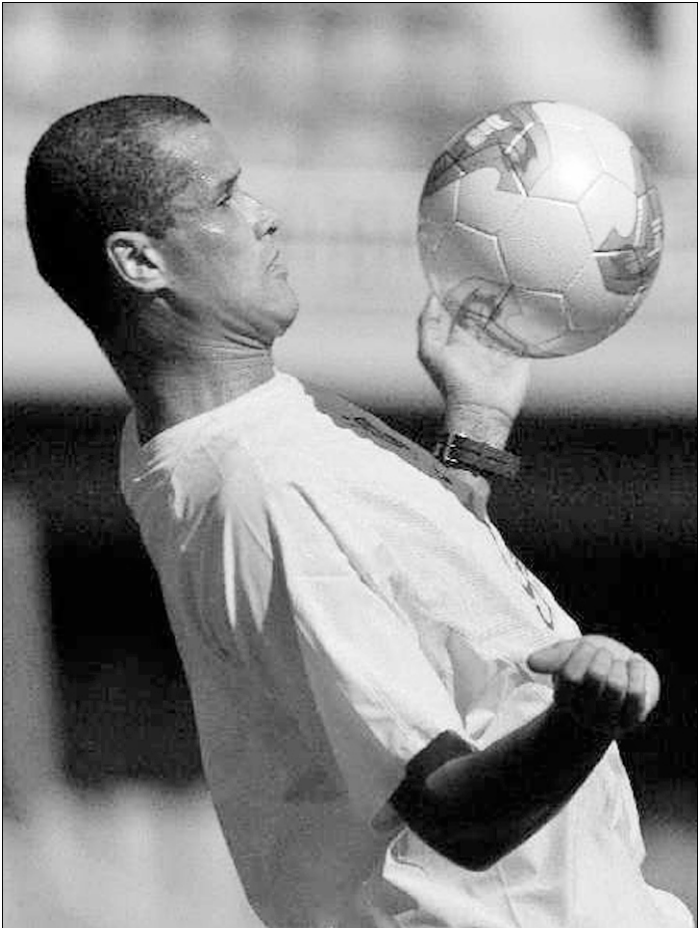


PHOTO: INTERNET

Brazil superstar Rivaldo showing his ball-controlling skills during the national team's practice session in Barcelona on May 16.

Beckham returns to training



INTERNET, Dubai

England have been boosted by David Beckham and Nicky Butt's return to training this morning. The Manchester United duo hadn't taken any part in the training sessions at their camp in Dubai as they recovered from injuries.

Beckham is recovering from a broken bone in his foot, but he showed very encouraging signs that he will be available for selection in England's first match against Sweden on June 2.

However it isn't all good news as Arsenal defender Sol Campbell sat out of training once again as he continues to recover from a gash in his leg that required eight stitches.



PHOTO: INTERNET

BECK IS BACK: A smiling England captain David Beckham takes to the field at the Dubai Police Club yesterday. (Can you spot 'Victoria' inscribed in Hindi on his left hand?)