

France, Spain blaze



AFP, Paris

It was a victorious night for the perennial under-achievers of European football on Saturday night as Spain won their Euro 2004 qualifier.

Defending European champions France meanwhile thrashed Slovenia 5-0 at the Stade de France for their second victory in two games.

Northern Ireland coach Sammy McIlroy may have been part of the playing squad when they beat hosts Spain in the 1982 World Cup finals but the magic failed to materialise

this time.

Northern Ireland beat Spain 1-0 in Valencia in a group game which has gone down in history as one of the most remarkable World Cup results, but in Albacete on Saturday night, Spain won 3-0 to set the record straight.

Two goals from Ruben Baraja and another from Guti earned Spain a big win in this Group 6 match.

The goal spree of France was a fitting celebration of the 100th cap of Marcel Desailly who ironically partnered debutant William Gallas in central defence.

The victory of France was all the more merited as coach Jacques Santini had to do without key players Djibril Cisse, Emmanuel Petit,

Bixente Lizarazu and David Trezeguet.

France scored through Vieira on 10 minutes, then got two from Steve Marlet in the 35th and 64th minutes before Sylvain Wiltord and Sidney Govou got in on the act in the 79th and 86th minutes.

France are now top of Group 1 ahead of Slovenia and Israel, who won 2-0 in Malta. In their first match, France battled back to beat Cyprus 2-1 in Nicosia.

It was a professional performance by the Blues who had little trouble in sweeping aside their opponents. Vieira, fed by Thierry Henry, was the first to put the ball past keeper Marko Simeunovic.

Then came skill from Marlet to further put wind in France's sails. Wiltord did some good work for Marlet's first goal and Lilian Thuram helped set up his second, though Wiltord got France's fourth thanks to a superb individual move.

Then came Govou's first goal for France in only his second appearance for his country, scoring from a header after a Mikael Silvestre cross.

In injury time, Slovenia's Saso Gajser was sent off for earning his second yellow card.

France now travel to Valletta on Wednesday where they will have the chance to further consolidate their lead in the pool against Malta.

Goals from Christian Dailly and Gary Naysmith gave Bert Vogts his first win since taking over as Scotland manager as his side beat Yugoslavia in their Group 9 Euro 2004 qualifier at a raucous San Paolo stadium here on Saturday.

Predrag Mijatovic, who used to earn a living in Italy with Fiorentina, opened the scoring with a close range effort before Alessandro Del Piero saved Italy's blushes with a heavily deflected free-kick.

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni, who almost lost his voice from shouting so much during a frustrating game, was relieved his side took a point from a match they rarely looked like winning.

"A draw would have seemed to me a glass half empty, but now that the game's over it looks half full," he said.

"I knew that Yugoslavia would prove difficult opponents and they showed that tonight.

"But it's an encounter over two legs so we will see what happens when we go there."

Trapattoni's opposite number Dejan Savicevic, who earned the nickname 'Il Genio' for his majestic displays for AC Milan in the early 1990s, was less satisfied with the outcome.

"We played a good match but it



France superstar Zinedine Zidane (C) performing his trickery against Slovenia's Anton Zlogar under the watchful eyes of coach Jacques Santini (L) at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis near Paris on October 12.

Back on track already



AFP, Paris

France plumbed the depths at the World Cup in the summer, returning home with their tails between their legs after the worst ever performance of any defending champion.

No goals and a first-round exit.

A managerial sacking later - Roger Lemerre bit the bullet following his team's return - and it has fallen to replacement Jacques Santini to wave a magic wand to ensure 'Les Bleus' do not give up their European title as cheaply.

If Saturday's 5-0 slaughter of Slovenia at the Stade de France is anything to go by, building on an earlier win in Cyprus, the new 'chef d'orchestre' possesses a magic touch in his baton.

And it looked more than wishful thinking as L'Equipe, the media barometer of national sentiment in the team, Sunday trumpeted a neat three-word verdict designed to send a chill wind blowing towards French rivals.

"Le Grand Retour (The great return)."

How much credit can go to Santini, who unveiled his credentials by leading Lyon to a first-ever French league title in May, is open to some question - but Saturday's performance suggested that, regardless of who is in charge on the bench, the World Cup fiasco was a temporary aberration.

Four months on, France look transformed and liberated as they look down on their Euro 2004 Group One rivals.

Israel, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta should not instil fear in any of the continent's big guns - yet the manner of Saturday's swashbuckling victory means a title defence in Portugal two summers hence is likely to attract short odds.

The Santini recipe is deceptively simple.

It is to resist the temptation of wiping the whole slate clean but blend the old with the new, coaxing the former to function as role models for the latter in a cohesive unit.

"As with all groups undergoing a reconstitution we are finding our bearings, discovering one another. The big defence tonight was our

athleticism, good rhythm - and booming confidence. The older heads must help the newcomers bed down," Santini explained.

In truth, the French failed in Asia after a marathon season in which at club level their stars have become victims of their own success, with the bulk of the squad based in the stamina-sapping environment of the English Premier league, Italy's rejuvenated Serie A and Spain's Primera Liga.

The irony is that by honing their skills in the world's finest leagues the squad raise the spectre of further potential burn-out come the 2004 finals.

No fewer than eight of Saturday's 11 starters play in England - Fabien Barthez, William Gallas, Marcel Desailly, Mikael Silvestre, Patrick Vieira, Steve Marlet, Sylvain Wiltord and Thierry Henry - while Robert Pires will return as soon as fitness permits.

Four of the five goals were scored by London-based stars, Fulham's Marlet claiming a brace with Pires' Arsenal teammates Vieira and Wiltord chipping in with one apiece, Henry for once cast in the role of provider.

Not bad for a forward line lacking the currently unfit David Trezeguet.

But Santini has been doing his bit on the domestic front and his Lyon protege Sidney Govou came off the bench to head the fifth, while club-mate Gregory Coupet has emerged as first understudy to keeper Barthez.

In addition, Eric Carriere is a bright midfield prospect as is Jeremie Brechet at the back.

Regarding 2004, the survivors of the France 98 and Euro 2000 'golden generation' have one more tournament at least left on them.

But in the emerging Lyon lions, Auxerre tri Philippe Mexes, Olivier Kapo and Djibril Cisse and Liverpool midfielder Bruno Cheyrou the Santini generation is developing rapidly.

Bad news not just for the Maltese on Wednesday in Valletta - but for England, Germany, Spain and Italy, who four months ago might have been forgiven for thinking the lights had gone out on La Grande Nation.

Instead, the humiliation has proved brief.

STANDINGS	
Standings in the qualifying competition for the Euro 2004 championship after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):	
GROUP 1	GROUP 6
France 2 2 0 0 7 1 6	Spain 2 2 0 0 5 0 6
Israel 1 1 0 0 2 0 3	Ukraine 2 1 1 0 4 2 4
Slovenia 2 1 0 1 3 5 3	Armenia 1 0 1 0 2 2 1
Cyprus 1 0 0 1 1 2 0	N. Ireland 1 0 0 1 0 2 3 0
Malta 2 0 0 2 0 5 0	Greece 2 0 0 2 0 4 0
GROUP 2	GROUP 7
Denmark 2 1 1 0 4 2 4	Turkey 2 2 0 0 5 1 6
Norway 2 1 1 0 3 2 4	England 1 1 0 0 2 1 3
Romania 2 1 0 1 3 1 3	Liechtenstein 1 0 1 0 1 1 1
Luxembourg 1 0 0 1 0 2 0	Macedonia 2 0 1 1 2 3 1
Bosnia 1 0 0 1 0 3 0	Slovakia 2 0 0 2 1 5 0
GROUP 3	GROUP 8
Austria 2 2 0 0 4 0 6	Bulgaria 2 2 0 0 4 0 6
Netherlands 1 1 0 0 3 0 3	Belgium 2 1 0 1 1 2 3
Czech Rep. 1 1 0 0 2 0 3	Estonia 1 0 1 0 0 0 1
Moldavia 2 0 0 2 0 4 0	Croatia 2 0 1 1 0 2 1
Belarus 2 0 0 2 0 5 0	Andorra 1 0 0 1 0 1 0
GROUP 4	GROUP 9
Latvia 2 1 1 0 1 0 4	Italy 2 1 1 0 3 1 4
Poland 2 1 0 1 2 1 3	Wales 1 1 0 0 2 0 3
Sweden 2 0 2 0 1 1 2	Finland 2 1 0 1 3 2 3
Hungary 1 0 1 0 1 1 1	Yugoslavia 1 0 1 0 1 1 1
San Marino 1 0 0 1 0 2 0	Azerbaijan 2 0 0 2 0 5 0
GROUP 5	GROUP 10
Scotland 2 1 1 0 4 2 4	Switzerland 2 1 1 0 5 2 4
Germany 1 1 0 0 2 0 3	Russia 1 1 0 0 4 2 3
Lithuania 2 1 0 1 2 2 3	Albania 1 0 1 0 1 1 1
Faroe Islands 2 0 1 1 2 4 1	Ireland 1 0 0 1 2 4 0
Iceland 1 0 0 1 0 2 0	Georgia 1 0 0 1 1 4 0

A weekend to forget



AFP, Bratislava

English football suffered one of its blackest weekends in years as the twin spectres of racism and crowd trouble overshadowed the national side's winning start to their qualifying campaign for the 2004 European Championships.

A late goal by Michael Owen gave England a 2-1 win over a spirited Slovakia and ensured everything was all right on the night in purely footballing terms.

But off the pitch it was a different story. Barely half an hour into the match fighting between English fans and their Slovak counterparts triggered a series of charges by the baton-wielding local riot police.

Such strenuous efforts at crowd control were however noticeably absent when England's two black players, Emile Heskey and Ashley Cole, were subjected to systematic abuse from the local supporters.

body of football in Europe.

"We have protested in the strongest possible terms to UEFA, both to the UEFA delegate here and beyond that," Newman said.

UEFA last week fined Dutch club PSV Eindhoven more than 20,000 Euros after Arsenal's French striker Thierry Henry was barracked and had missiles thrown at him during a Champions League match.

The organisation has also launched an action plan aimed at stamping out racism in football.

But in England, which has largely eradicated racist abuse from football grounds, there is a growing feeling that fines are insufficient and that UEFA should be moving towards tougher sanctions, such as forcing offending clubs or national associations to play matches behind closed doors.

"They (UEFA) are the ones that have launched the campaign, they are the ones that need to increase the penalties if they want it to be effective, it is as simple as that," Newman said.

England officials also made it



BLOODY TOUGH BEING AN ENGLISH FAN! An unidentified England supporter is covered with blood after getting injured in a violent clash in Bratislava on October 11 ahead of the England-Slovakia Euro 2004 qualifier.

Ladislav Jurkemik, Slovakia's coach, declined the opportunity to condemn the racists, saying he had been too busy concentrating on his team's performance to notice the barracking of Heskey and Cole.

But England's players and their Swedish coach, Sven-Goran Eriksson were dismayed by the hostility displayed to the two black players and the lack of any response from the Slovak authorities.

"It is crazy," Eriksson said. "We live in the year 2002 and we should not have to put up with this."

England had raised the issue of racist abuse prior to the match and received assurances that any offending fans would be ejected from the ground - a pledge that was blatantly ignored.

England captain David Beckham added: "There's things that go on outside the football pitch but I think the most disturbing part tonight was the racism directed at a couple of our players.

"I think maybe something else has got to be done now, something different, because it's not working."

Paul Newman, a spokesman for the English Football Association, said an official complaint would be lodged with UEFA, the governing

clear they believed that the Slovakian riot police had behaved in a heavy-handed way.

Newman described the baton-charging of England fans as "inappropriate to say the least" and said the FA had photographs which showed the police had gone over the top in their reaction.

The build-up to the match had been tense following an overnight shooting in the centre of Bratislava which left two England fans with bullet wounds.

One of the fans, Gareth Jones, had to have surgery to remove a bullet from his neck while the other, Phil Holland, suffered a leg wound.

The two men were injured after a security guard began shooting following a brawl which broke out when a group of some 60 English fans refused to leave a bar at closing time.

The men who were hit took refuge in the doorway of the England team hotel before being taken to hospital. Eriksson and a number of the players heard the shots. "I looked out of my window and it was like something out of the wild west," Eriksson said.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated Euro 2004 qualifier results on Saturday:

Group 1 At Ta Qali, Malta Malta 0 Israel 2 (Balali 56, Revivo 75) At Paris France 5 (Vieira 10, Marlet 35, 64, Wiltord 79, Govou 86) Slovenia 0	Group 2 At Bucharest Romania 0 Norway 1 (Iversen 84) At Copenhagen Denmark 2 (Tomasson 51-pen, Sand 71) Luxembourg 0	Group 3 At Minsk Belarus 0 Austria 2 (Schopp 57, Akagunduz 89) At Chisinau, Moldova Moldova 0 Czech Republic 2 (Jankulovski 68-pen, Rosicky 78)	Group 4 At Solna, Sweden Sweden 1 (Ibrahimovic 75) Hungary 1 (Kenesei 4) At Warsaw Poland 0 Latvia 1 (Laizins 30)	Group 5 At Reykjavik Iceland 0 Scotland 2 (Dailly 7, Naysmith 64) At Kaunas, Lithuania Lithuania 2 (Razanauskas 11-pen, Poskus 37) Faroe Islands 0	Group 6 At Kiev Ukraine 2 (Vorobei 51, Voronin 90) Greece 0 At Albacete, Spain Spain 3 (Ruben Baraja 18, 88, Guti 58) Northern Ireland 0	Group 7 At Bratislava Slovakia 1 (Nemeth 24) England 2 (Beckham 65, Owen 83) At Skopje Macedonia 1 (Grozdanovski 2) Turkey 2 (Okan 29, Nihat 53)	Group 8 At Sofia Bulgaria 2 (S. Petrov 22, Berbatov 37) Croatia 0 At Andorra Andorra 0 Belgium 1 (Sonck 61)	Group 9 At Helsinki Finland 3 (Agahayev 14-og, Tiainen 60, Hypyae 72) Azerbaijan 0 At Naples, Italy Italy 1 (Del Piero 39) Yugoslavia 1 (Mijatovic 27)	Group 10 At Tirana Albania 1 (Murati 68) Switzerland 1 (Yakin 37) At Tbilisi Georgia v Russia, match postponed due to floodlight failure
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Del Piero the saviour



AFP, Naples

Lacklustre Italy were held to a disappointing 1-1 draw by Yugoslavia in their Group 9 Euro 2004 qualifier at a raucous San Paolo stadium here on Saturday.

Predrag Mijatovic, who used to earn a living in Italy with Fiorentina, opened the scoring with a close range effort before Alessandro Del Piero saved Italy's blushes with a heavily deflected free-kick.

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni, who almost lost his voice from shouting so much during a frustrating game, was relieved his side took a point from a match they rarely looked like winning.

"A draw would have seemed to me a glass half empty, but now that the game's over it looks half full," he said.

"I knew that Yugoslavia would prove difficult opponents and they showed that tonight.

"But it's an encounter over two legs so we will see what happens when we go there."

Trapattoni's opposite number Dejan Savicevic, who earned the nickname 'Il Genio' for his majestic displays for AC Milan in the early 1990s, was less satisfied with the outcome.

"We played a good match but it

was a shame to miss out on three points because of such a fortunate goal," lamented the Yugoslav.

Trapattoni's hopes were high given the outstanding early season performances of stars such as Del Piero and Filippo Inzaghi, who have scored with alarming regularity in Serie A and the Champions League.

"Usually in October and November the national side is in great form," he said.

"But this time we couldn't get the easy things right. Obviously there is too much tension and too much desire to do well."

Italy started full of purpose with AC Milan prodigy Andrea Pirlo, filling in for injured AS Roma captain Francesco Totti, pulling the strings in midfield behind the front pairing of Inzaghi and Del Piero.

Pirlo carved out an excellent opening in the 10th minute but when his slide rule pass was headed across goal by Fabio Cannavaro, visiting goalkeeper Dragan Jevric was alert to the danger.

Despite their early dominance the Italians looked nervous when defending set pieces, and Lazio defender Sinisa Mihajlovic had home goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon in trouble with two excellent inswinging corners.

Italy faded after a promising opening spell and they fell behind in the 27th minute.

Mijatovic cut inside from the right and evaded a half-hearted challenge by Alessandro Nesta before stroking the ball into the far corner of the net beyond the outstretched Buffon.

Italy played their best football after going a goal down. Del Piero shot wide from a tight angle and the Juventus striker levelled the scores with one of his trademark set-pieces six minutes from the break.

Mihajlovic conceded a free-kick 22 yards from goal and Del Piero's stinging right-footer cannoned off the defensive wall and wide of the static Jevric.

Italy came out firing in the second half but their smart approach play lacked a cutting edge with Del Piero and Inzaghi woefully short of ideas.

The hosts bore the brunt of an impatient home crowd and thought they had snatched a late winner when Vincenzo Montella, a second-half substitute, lashed home a volley from eight yards out only to be ruled offside.

Italy, who look as if they are still shell-shocked following their World Cup second round defeat to South Korea this summer, lacked the passion shown by Yugoslavia who held out for a draw and were worthy of a point.

The Italians travel to Cardiff to face Wales on Wednesday in an attempt to get back to winning ways while Yugoslavia host Finland.

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Italy superstar Alessandro Del Piero (L) outfoxing the Yugoslav defence at Naples' San Paolo Stadium on October 12.

England tested



AFP, Bratislava

England's pretensions to be serious contenders to win the 2004 European Championships took almost as much of a battering as some of their fans received from Slovakia's riot police here on Saturday.

Out-fought by a Slovakian side that has never reached the finals of a major tournament, Sven-Goran Eriksson's side needed a Michael Owen winner seven minutes from time and some desperate late defending to earn a 2-1 victory in their opening Group 7 match.

Middlesbrough striker Szilard Nemeth had lived up to his prediction that he would score against his adopted country by giving the home side a deserved lead mid-way through the first half and he might easily have put the match beyond England's reach just after the break.

But after England got back on level terms with a somewhat fortu-

nate David Beckham goal in the 65th minute, they claimed victory after a blunder by Slovakia defender Peter Hlinka.

The big stopper was caught in possession in the area by Paul Scholes, who immediately fired in a low cross. Owen got in front of his marker and stooped low to head home.

It was anything but a deserved victory for an England side but the three points ensures Eriksson's men are on track in a difficult group that also includes World Cup semi-finalists Turkey.

Only the group winners qualify automatically for the finals in Portugal in two years time and Slovakia, who lost 3-0 to Turkey last month, now look out of contention.

"I'm really disappointed because we could have beaten England today," Slovak coach Ladislav Jurkemik said afterwards.

"The two goals we conceded were the result of individual errors by our players but I still want to congratulate them on their performance. I'm just sad that I cannot congratulate them on a win."

Eriksson admitted his side had

been outplayed in the first 30 minutes. "But then we came more and more into the game and I'm very happy with what happened in the second half."

"To come back from a goal down, away from home and given the state of the pitch, showed extremely good spirit and even some good football."

England had started brightly enough, Emile Heskey testing Miroslav Konic with a snap shot from the left edge of the box in the sixth minute.

But it quickly became apparent that Slovakia had adapted better to the freezing, damp conditions and the quagmire of a pitch, which UEFA had only passed as playable following a mid-afternoon inspection.

A minute after Heskey's effort, Slovakia should have taken the lead after good work by their German-based playmaker Miroslav Konic. The powerfully-built midfielder picked up a loose ball 40 yards out and threaded a neat pass inside Ashley Cole for Nemeth to run onto.

The Middlesbrough forward slipped the ball to the unmarked Robert Vittek but he stumbled in the mud, allowing Gareth Southgate

Fergie claims innocence



AFP, London

The South African woman at the centre of sexual harassment claims against Manchester United's Alex Ferguson told a British Sunday paper that the football manager touched her repeatedly and asked her into his hotel.

Nadia Abrahams, 21, told the Sunday Mirror tabloid in an exclusive interview that after meeting Ferguson in a Cape Town jazz club he asked her for a lift back to his hotel early on Friday morning.

"It was frightening, I didn't know the guy. He could have done anything to me. I decided to drive him just to get rid of him. I honestly didn't know what to do," she said in the newspaper.

"On the way he kept putting his hand on my inner thigh.

"He did this several times. Each time he did it he kept going on about the night still being young and that it didn't have to end. It was sickening. I kept pushing his hand away and saying that I was involved with someone, but he wouldn't listen. He kept asking me back to his hotel for coffee."

As police investigated the woman's allegation Ferguson on Saturday flatly dismissed the claim.

And he suggested the woman had been motivated by the idea of selling her story to the British press.

Giving his version of events in a statement Ferguson said: "I would like to make it clear that any allegations of improper conduct, let alone sexual assault, on my part are untrue and entirely without foundation."

He also denied that it was his suggestion that he travelled with her in the car saying Abrahams had said she could drop him back at the hotel.

Taking advantage of a break in English Premiership fixtures, Ferguson has been in South Africa since Wednesday to examine linking the giant club, the richest in world football, with academies which develop young players.

Ferguson guided Scottish club Aberdeen to the 1983 European Cup Winners Cup and Super Cup trophies and took temporary charge of Scotland at the 1986 World Cup finals after Jock Stein died of a heart attack.

Since moving to United he has landed seven Premiership titles, four FA Cup final victories, a European Cup Winners Cup and the pinnacle of his time in charge, the 1999 European Cup.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1999.

time to clear.

A foul on Paul Scholes in the ninth minute gave Beckham a free kick in his favoured territory but his effort was as miserable as the weather, crashing straight into the wall.

The lively Nemeth then fired into the side netting and threatened again in the 17th minute when he wriggled to the byline and produced a cutback that Steven Gerrard almost knocked into his own net.

Slovakia's pressure finally paid off in the 24th minute. Vladimir Janocko got behind Gary Neville on the left and put in a deep cross that Attila Pinte rose to meet with a downward header. The ball stuck in the mud leaving Nemeth with the simplest of tasks to sweep the ball past David Seaman from inside the six-yard box.

Beckham hit the target with a free-kick in the 26th minute, Nicky Butt fired just wide two minutes later and Gareth Southgate had a header well stopped by Konic six minutes before the break.

But England were looking anything but championship contenders and Slovakia should have gone two-

up within a minute of the restart.

Janocko was allowed time to hit a pass through the inside left channel for Nemeth to chase. With Seaman off his line, his attempt at a chip was the right choice but the execution let him down and Seaman was able to save easily.

England's equaliser had a freakish element to it, the Slovak defence allowing Beckham's free-kick from the left to drift over their heads. Owen got in behind for what should have been an easy finish but afterwards admitted he had failed to make any contact with the ball, which duly continued into the net with Konic frozen to the spot.

With Slovakia showing signs of tiredness, England began to pile on the pressure and it paid off when Scholes pounced on Hlinka's lapse to set up Owen.

Even then, Slovakia might have earned a point when Nemeth broke free right at the death and saw his deflected effort loop agonisingly over Seaman's bar.