

Meeting of a lifetime

Football

REUTERS, Johannesburg

England captain David Beckham has described meeting Nelson Mandela as an "amazing honour" as the former South African president asked him to back the country's bid for the 2010 soccer World Cup.

Beckham, who leads England in a friendly against South Africa on Thursday, smiled and presented an English soccer jersey to the anti-apartheid icon -- an avid sports fan.

"We are looking for the 2010 soccer (World Cup) and we hope that you and the British people will support our bid," he said.

"I have a promise from David Beckham that they will support our bid. That alone gives us a great deal of hope," Mandela later told Lucas Radebe, who will lead the South African side.

South Africa faces rival bids from five other African countries. South Africa narrowly lost its bid for the 2006 tournament after a controversial vote handed it to Germany.

Beckham told reporters in Durban on Tuesday a World Cup in South Africa would be amazing.

"If I look after myself and treat my body right, I'd love to be here in 2010," the Star newspaper reported him as saying.

The England visit has been given blanket coverage by the country's media, with newspapers jokingly said he would not put it on for fear of offending the South African team.

Mandela used his meeting with the English squad to bolster support for South Africa's World Cup bid.

"I'm too old to express an opinion on this latest development for young people," Mandela said to laughter from the players and his own staff who crowded the auditorium at Mandela's foundation offices.

"David, we love your hair. It's Africa," shouted Bridget Prince as Beckham and his team mates later signed soccer balls and posed for pictures.

A handful of Mandela's grandchildren, dressed in tracksuits and school uniforms, were given a reprieve from lessons to meet their sports heroes.

"I think he's the greatest player," said Zozuko after shaking hands with the England captain.

But another Mandela grandson Bambata was less awed by Beckham -- or at least his hairdo.

"It's ok, but I've had hair like that before," he said.



BEND IT LIKE MANDELA! Former South African President Nelson Mandela holds an England national team shirt presented to him by England captain David Beckham on behalf of the team during a meeting at Nelson Mandela's Foundations office in Johannesburg yesterday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

South Africa v England More than just a friendly

Football

AFP, Durban

The friendly football international between South Africa and England on Thursday promises to be quite an event judged by the build-up.

South African officials axed the national coach because they did not agree with his selections, only to get substantial dollops of egg on their faces as five 'new' players withdrew due to injury or club commitments in Europe.

And as temporarily suspended coach Shakes Mashaba kicks his heels, he could seek sympathy from a guest at a match that marks the international launch of the South African bid to host the 2010 World Cup.

Widely travelled Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz was in charge of Bafana Bafana (The Boys) for two years from 2000 before being stabbed in the back as domestic football politics reared its ugly head once more.

Considered inadequate by South Africa, he was wooed by Alex Ferguson, appointed assistant to the Scot with the Midas touch, and won the respect of hard-to-please midfielder Roy Keane as United regained the English Premiership.

While South Africa have lunged from crisis to crisis, picking up plenty of negative publicity along the way despite the efforts of their spin doctors, England have revelled in the pre-match hype.

Football has been confined to the back seats as the new African hairstyle of Manchester United golden boy David Beckham dominated the front pages of South African newspapers.

Denying the latest change had anything to do with his visit to Africa, the footballer who has become a legend through his swerving free kicks, offered a simple explanation after arriving in the Indian Ocean city.

"My hair was touching my face so I needed to do something about it," he told a media conference.

Not far behind the golden 'corn rows' of Becks was the meeting with another icon, former president Nelson Mandela, who shook hands 11 years ago in Johannesburg with a then unknown United teenager sporting a regular haircut.

How times have changed! Beckham is now the highest paid footballer in the world and instantly recognisable everywhere except the United States - a flaw soon to be fixed when United tour there.

As if that was not enough, England arrived in new grey suits designed by another star, Italian catwalk king Giorgio Armani, with underwear, belts, shoes, sunglasses and watches thrown in for good measure.

When the time finally arrives for the football before a sell-out 50,000 crowd at a stadium owned by the Natal Sharks provincial rugby union team, the 'circus' could take another turn.

Stand-in South Africa coach and former star Jomo Sono says he wants to give all his players - and that means 20 - a chance to 'rub shoulders' with Beckham, United midfielder Paul Scholes, and Liverpool striker Michael Owen.

Perhaps mindful of the 'yellow card' he received from world football ruling body FIFA after changing his entire team at half-time in a recent friendly against Australia, England manager Sven Goran Eriksson was less ambitious.

"We are permitted five changes and I would like to make a few more if necessary, but there will be no repeat of the Australia experiment," he stressed.

The countries met in Manchester six years ago with a disputed Ian Wright goal giving England a 2-1 win in a match remembered most for a vicious tackle on Paul Gascoigne by South African hardman Innocent Buthelezi.

Italian Cup final Milan halfway there

Football

REUTERS, Rome

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Italian Cup final Milan halfway there

AC Milan take a commanding 4-1 lead into the second leg of their Italian Cup final against AS Roma after enjoying a second-half goal spree at the Olympic Stadium on Tuesday.

Two goals by Brazilian midfielder Serginho and further efforts by Massimo Ambrosini and Ukraine striker Andriy Shevchenko put the Champions League finalists into a virtually unassassable position for the return match in Milan on May 31.

The home side looked secure having grabbed the lead in the 28th minute when Francesco Totti curled a free kick past keeper Christian Abbiati.

But after right back Cafu wasted a chance to extend Roma's advantage in the 60th minute, the home side's defence suffered a disastrous 10-minute period, conceding three goals that effectively ended the contest.

While Roma fielded a full-strength side as they aim to make up for a disappointing Serie A season with victory in the Cup, AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti left several first-team regulars out of his squad in preparation for next week's Champions League final against Juventus.

Captain Paolo Maldini, goalkeeper Dida, defender Alessandro Nesta, midfielder Rui Costa and striker Filippo Inzaghi were the most notable omissions.

The players left, however, were not without incentive. Ancelotti's starting line-up featured Brazilians Rivaldo and midfielder Serginho -- both making last-minute bids to justify a call-up against Juve.

Roma captain Totti broke the deadlock just before the half hour mark. He was brought down by Milan defender Roque Junior and from the resulting free kick, 25 metres out, fired a shot round the wall and into the net.

The home side could have gone two up on the hour when Cassano slipped a pass to right back Cafu, unmarked on the right of the area, but Abbiati easily parried the Brazilian's shot.

Maradona meets Maradona

Football

INTERNET, Naples

Diego Maradona met the son he

never acknowledged he had at a

charity golf function in Italy yester-

day.

Celtic fans, who were warned by

the Archbishop to be on their best

behaviour in Seville, will be hoping

Conti's blessing contains a positive

omen -- he was Archbishop of

Aberdeen when the city's side

became the last Scottish side to lift

European silverware, 20 years ago.

That miss proved costly. A minute later the scores were level. As Jon Dahl Tomasson tussled with Christian Panucci in the Roma area, the Italian international defender appeared to brush the ball aside with his hand.

The referee pointed to the penalty spot and Serginho calmly converted.

That proved the cue for Roma's defences to unravel.

In the 69th minute, Rivaldo curled a free kick into the Roma area from wide on the left. Ambrosini's marker, defender Jonathan Zebina, was nowhere to be seen, and the Milan midfielder headed past Roma keeper Ivan Pelizzoli to give his side the lead.

With Roma pushing every man forward, Milan striker Andriy Shevchenko latched on to a long ball, slipped round Panucci and lobbed the keeper to leave Roma's hopes in ruins and give his side a psychological boost for next week's all-Italian Champions League showdown.

Zebina was again missing when Serginho picked up a long pass before beating Pelizzoli with the outside of his boot three minutes later to make it 3-1.

Milan then weathered a period of late Roma pressure before completing the rout a minute from the end of normal time.

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