

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.

"To meet a great man such as you is an amazing honour for everyone involved in the FA (Football Association) and the England team," said Beckham, who spoke softly and appeared nervous with Mandela.

He handed the 84-year-old a white jersey with "Mandela 03" printed on the back. Mandela 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.

"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 saying.

The England visit has been given blanket coverage by the country's media, with newspapers

splashing pictures of Beckham's new, cornrow-style hairdo.

Mandela, asked about Beckham's hairstyle, laughed and touched his own white hair.

"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 Mandelas' Foundations office in Johannesburg yesterday.



DOING IT WITH SAMBA! Lyon's Brazilian trio (from L) Jose Edmilson, Juninho Pernambucano and Claudio Roberto da Silva (Cacapa) on the balcony of Lyon City Hall as they celebrate their Ligue 1 championship with fans on May 20.

Ligue 1 Title as good as Lyon's

Football

AFP, Paris

Lyon are virtually assured of their second consecutive French league title after a 1-1 draw with Montpellier on Tuesday.

Lyon have a three-point advantage and a massively superior goal difference over their closest challengers Marseille going into their final match, at home to Guingamp on Saturday.

Monaco threw away their chance of a first title for three years when they were beaten 3-1 at Guingamp.

That result leaves Didier Deschamps' team third on 64 points, one point behind Marseille, who are on 65 after their 4-2 thrashing of Sedan. Lyon have 68 points.

Lyon's progress to the second title in their history suffered a serious setback when Montpellier took the lead after 12 minutes at the Stade de la Mosson.

Habib Bamogo shrugged off the marking of Jeremy Brechet to slot the ball past goalkeeper Gregory Coupet.

Lyon drew level when Sidney Govou superbly cut in from the right wing to create an easy chance for Brazilian World Cup winner Juninho, who lashed the ball into the roof of the net.

Juninho came closest to grabbing the winner in the second half when he hit the crossbar with an audacious shot from 40 yards.

Lyon coach Paul Le Guen was happy to declare his side champions.

"We were very good in our final matches," he said. "We were consistent over the end of the season and this is the reward for a group of players who know what they want

and will do everything to reach their goal."

Having started the day in second position, Monaco made a disastrous start when Stephane Carnot put Guingamp ahead in the first half.

A quarter of an hour into the second period, Carnot scored a second goal after being gifted the ball by the Monaco defence.

But Didier Deschamps' men showed fighting spirit by pulling a goal back four minutes later through Congolese striker Shabani Nonda who fired home after exchanging passes with Ludovic

inhuman to play a championship decider three days after a final," said France's 1998 World Cup-winning captain.

"But congratulations to Lyon, who amassed more points than anyone else."

Marseille meanwhile moved into the runners-up spot and a ticket into the European Champions League despite throwing away a two-goal lead at home to Sedan.

Sebastien Perez and Cyril Chapuis created the lead but Pius N'Dieff pulled a goal back and Perez put into his own net to level

TOP SCORERS	
Leading scorers in the French football league after Tuesday's matches, the penultimate matchday of the season:	
23 - Shabani Nonda (Monaco)	
21 - Pauleta (Bordeaux)	
15 - Didier Drogba (Guingamp)	
14 - Djibril Cisse (Auxerre)	
13 - Henri Camara (Sedan), Juninho (Lyon)	
12 - Sonny Anderson (Lyon)	
11 - Jean-Claude Darcheville (Bordeaux), Kaba Diawara (Nice), Ludovic Giuly (Monaco), Peguy Luyindula (Lyon), Antoine Sibierski (Lens)	

Giuly.

With a quarter of an hour remaining, Dado Prso just failed to connect with Giuly's cross when well placed in the Guingamp area.

But Florent Malouda scored the decisive third goal in stoppage time.

Deschamps said his players were exhausted after winning the League Cup on Saturday. "It is

TOP SIX	
French football league table after Tuesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):	
Lyon	37 19 11 7 62 37 68
Marseille	37 19 8 10 41 35 65
Monaco	37 18 10 9 60 33 64
Bordeaux	37 17 10 10 55 36 61
Sochaux	37 16 13 8 44 30 61
Auxerre	37 17 10 10 36 2 9
61	

the scores.

Brahim Hemdani's sidefooted shot gave Marseille a 3-2 lead and Lamine Sakho completed the job in injury time.

Marseille, who won the 1993 European Champions League but were later stripped of the title for match-fixing, must not slip up at Nantes on Saturday, knowing Monaco are just a point behind and play Troyes at home, who are already relegated.

In other matches, Bordeaux stayed fourth after drawing 1-1 at Nice, and are tied on 61 points with Sochaux and Auxerre in the race for a UEFA Cup place.

Italian Cup final Milan halfway there

Football

REUTERS, Rome

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 unassailable 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.

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.

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.

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.



Massimo Ambrosini (C) of AC Milan celebrates with teammates Serginho (R) and Rivaldo after scoring against AS Roma at Rome's Olympic stadium on May 20.

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.

Brazil v France in May 2004

Football

REUTERS, Zurich

World champions Brazil and European champions France will play in a special friendly match in Paris next year to mark the 100th anniversary of FIFA, world soccer's governing body said on Tuesday.

Brazil will travel to the Stade de France on May 20, 2004, as part of

the centenary festivities for FIFA, who were formed in Paris on May 21, 1904.

FIFA will officially launch the celebrations in Paris on June 29 prior to the final of next month's Confederations Cup.

European soccer's governing body UEFA and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) will be involved of the proceedings next summer as they commemorate their 50th anniversaries.

Tragic!

UEFA CUP

REUTERS, Seville

Celtic supporters turned Seville's old town into a blur of green, white and sunburned pink before Wednesday's UEFA Cup final but the party mood was shaken with news of the death of a Porto fan in a

swimming accident.

While Scottish fans were celebrating their team's first European final in 33 years, a 17-year-old supporter of the Portuguese side drowned in the city's river Guadalquivir after going for a swim with friends.

The accident occurred while temperatures in the city were nudging 40 degrees celsius.

Blair's blessings

UEFA CUP

AFP, Seville

Celtic's bid for UEFA Cup glory has been blessed by an Archbishop and backed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and thousands of other well-wishers from around the world.

In a personal message to Celtic manager Martin O'Neill, Blair said he believed the Scottish champions deserved to lift the trophy.

"Celtic already has its place in European football history as the

first British team to win the European Cup back in 1967," Blair wrote.

"Reaching the final of the competition this year is a huge achievement of which you and everyone connected with the club can be proud.

"To go and win it would be fantastic."

O'Neill said the fax from Blair had been a welcome boost for his side ahead of Wednesday's final.

"It was well received and much appreciated."

Mario Conti, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Glasgow, also wrote to O'Neill to wish the

club, which has a long association with the church, success.

"As Archbishop of Glasgow, a city which has a robust interest in and support of football, I am delighted that one of our teams - Celtic, a club founded by a Marist Brother and with a noble history of achievement - is to play at the highest level of European football," the cleric wrote.

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.

Maradona meets Maradona



DIEGO MARADONA



MARADONA JR

Football

INTERNET, Naples

Diego Maradona met the son he never acknowledged he had at a charity golf function in Italy yesterday.

Diego Armando Maradona Jr is 17 and plays for the Napoli youth

team, but the pair had never met.

The boy went to the golf course unannounced, and called his father, only to be given the finger, according to reports.

Maradona Senior was then told that it was his son, and the pair talked for an hour.

The youngster was reported to have said: "It's my father who missed something in these 17 years, not me."