



PHOTO: AP

WELCOME! Veteran United States international and San Jose Earthquakes defender Jeff Agoos floors D.C. United's teen sensation Freddy Adu during their Major League Soccer opener in Washington on April 3.

Much ado about Adu

Football

AP, Washington

Chants of "Freddy, Freddy" echoed throughout the stadium Saturday whenever a D.C. United player missed a scoring chance early in the second half.

Finally, in the 61st minute, the moment arrived.

Flashbulbs popped amid the roars as 14-year-old soccer prodigy Freddy Adu entered the game and became the youngest athlete to play in a major American league in more than 100 years.

No one in the stadium sat down for the next 10 minutes. Fans waited for magic that never came. Adu had few quality touches and never took a shot in Saturday's 2-1 victory over the San Jose Earthquakes in the MLS opener, but the ice was broken on the career of soccer's next great American hope.

"When I got out there, I just felt I was a step slower than normal," Adu said. "But that was probably because of the whole atmosphere. I got some playing time. I didn't get as much as I'd like, but I got it out off the way, and now I'm ready to go. ... I'm glad it's over."

Adu's debut created interest never before seen in the history of the nine-year old league. Reporters from Europe and Asia claimed some of the 250 media credentials issued for the match, the only regular-season game scheduled to be broadcast by ABC this season. Adu has already appeared on "60 Minutes" and "Late Show with David Letterman" and his salary is a

league-high \$500,000.

"We never expected that it would turn into Freddie-mania," commissioner Don Garber said, "that this guy would have the personality that he has, to be as comfortable as he is in front of the cameras, be such a crossover so soon. He seems to really thrive with the attention."

But all the hoopla might have been a little too much, and that's why coach Peter Nowak had Adu on the bench at the start of the game. Nowak said Adu's performance was "so-so."

"He was really nervous before they even kicked the first pass," Nowak said. "I told him to play more in the middle to get more touches and enjoy the game. He did all right. For the first time, he did very well."

United sold out the game at RFK Stadium's MLS-downsized capacity of 24,603. The stadium holds 53,000, but United has closed the upper deck this season to create a greater demand for tickets and encourage advance sales.

"I'm definitely here to see Freddy," Washington resident Dickinson Gould said. "I'm not a huge soccer fan, but I've heard and read so much about Freddy that I was really interested to see what he's all about."

When his name was announced before the game, Adu responded with a wave and shared a laugh with teammate Santino Quaranta, whom Adu eclipsed as the youngest-ever MLS player. Quaranta was 16 when he debuted three years ago.

"Before the game, I wasn't sure if it was Ringling Brothers or an MLS game," San Jose forward Landon Donovan said. "I couldn't tell. There

was just so much stuff going on, but it's good."

United was already leading 2-1 when Adu entered the game, and he had only one open-field opportunity to display his creativity and talent. He had U.S. national team defender Jeff Agoos one-on-one in the 84th minute, but the 35-year-old veteran held his ground.

Adu dribbled five steps against Agoos before flopping to the turf some 25 yards from the goal. When Adu made a meager plea for a foul, the referee told him to get up and keep playing.

"I don't care if he's 15 or 55, he signed a contract with the league," Agoos said. "We're not going in to hurt him. But if he steps on the field like Jaime (Moreno) or Bobby (Convey) or anybody else, we don't want him to score, so we've got to do what we've got to do."

Said Adu: "Obviously the fans were booing the ref, but I thought it was great defense. Next time I know what I've got to do -- do it a little quicker."

Ironically, the game's best player was the one who had wanted Adu's number. Moreno, who has been with the league since its inception, scored on a header off Stewart's free kick in the 12th minute and played a beautiful long pass to set up Alecko Eskandarian's goal in the 39th.

Moreno, acquired in a trade with MetroStars, wasn't allowed to have his customary No. 9 because that is Adu's number. The 30-year-old Bolivian, who is more than twice Adu's age, settled instead for No. 99.

Ronnie Ekelund scored on a penalty kick in the 19th minute for

the Earthquakes.

Both teams finished with 10 players. San Jose's Craig Waibel received a red card for a high-cleat tackle on Moreno in the 76th minute, and Demba Kovalenko was expelled for hitting Brian Mullen in the face in the 80th.

Adu is the youngest person to play for a major American team since 14-year-old Fred Chapman debuted for Philadelphia of major league baseball's American Association in 1887.

Adu grew up playing on rocky fields in Ghana and moved to Maryland at age 8 when his family won an immigration lottery. His talent was discovered by a local coach, and European clubs tried to sign him.

He opted instead to spend the last two years in Florida training with U.S. national youth teams. He became an American citizen last year and scored four goals for the U.S. team in the under-17 world championship. A deal was struck for him to be selected No. 1 overall by United in this year's draft, an arrangement that allows him to live at home with his family in Potomac, Md.

Last month, Adu completed high school in an accelerated program at the Florida academy and will receive his diploma in May.

You never lose!

AFP, London

Junior footballers in some parts of Britain are set to be spared the 'trauma' of being on the wrong-end of lopsided results under new regulations being drawn up for next season.

These include resetting the scoreline to 0-0 at half-time and allowing the weaker side to play two extra players.

According to a report in Britain's Sunday Times broadsheet, schoolchildren in Edinburgh next season will have the score in their matches cancelled if one side is more than five goals behind at half-time.

Another planned change in the Scottish capital could see nine children against seven in a seven-a-side match where the interval score was excessively one-sided.

The new rules will apply throughout Scotland by 2005 and under-12 tournaments will be encouraged to remove all trophies.

The Edinburgh experiment has the backing of the Scottish Football Association (SFA), the sport's national governing body.

But critics say trying to insulate children from the experience of failure is no preparation for life and encourages them to think that there is something wrong with winning.

"This is not reality. We live in a competitive world and children need to learn how to deal with competition, winning and losing," said Alan Smith, president of the Scottish School Board Association.

News of the Edinburgh changes comes after a row where England's Derbyshire Times newspaper reported on a 29-0 "trouncing" of a junior team. However, the rules of the Sheffield and district junior Sunday league stipulate that no defeat of more than 14-0 should be reported.

Becks denies affair

AFP, London

David Beckham rebutted a British tabloid newspaper report that he had had an affair with his personal assistant in Madrid.

The News of the World alleged Beckham had an affair with 26-year-old Rebecca Loos, the daughter of a Dutch diplomat, because his wife Victoria Beckham had refused to move permanently to the Spanish capital where he plays for Real Madrid.

In a statement issued via his agent, the England football captain said the allegations were "ludicrous" and added he had a "wonderful wife and two very special kids".

The statement said: "During the past few months I have become accustomed to reading more and more ludicrous stories about my private life.

"What appeared this morning is just one further example.

"The simple truth is that I am very happily married, have a wonderful wife and two very special kids.

"There is nothing that any third party can do to change these facts."

Beckham could yet take legal action against the News of the World.

The former Manchester United midfielder married when Victoria was a member of the pop group the Spice Girls.

Primera Liga

Carlos saves the day

Football

AFP, Madrid

Two goals derived from Roberto Carlos's trademark thunderbolt left foot free-kicks proved to be the difference as Real Madrid consolidated their position at the top of the Spanish first division with a hard fought 2-1 win at Albacete.

"It was a tough game for both teams. When they had the ball we closed them down well and vice-versa. We didn't have a great game but we overcame the suffering to win," said Real coach Carlos Queiroz.

The Brazilian World Cup winner opened the scoring after 19 minutes with a shot from the edge of the area, although the ball took a deflection from Albacete defender Oscar Montiel which left his keeper Manuel Almunia with little hope of stopping the ball reaching the net.

Luis Figo was credited with the reigning Spanish champions' second goal after 71 minutes, although

in fairness the Portugal captain knew next-to-nothing about his seventh league goal of the season as Roberto Carlos's long distance hot struck him on the hip before flying past Almunia.

Libero Parri gave Real an anxious final few minutes when he scored from an individual effort eight minutes from time.

Parri's right foot blast from 25 metres bouncing awkwardly in front of Iker Casillas before the Spanish international pushed the ball into his own net, but Real clung on to their three points during a frantic final few minutes.

However, it was the only error Casillas made all night and he produced a spectacular reaction

save midway through the second half to stop Mikel Aguirre from scoring with a close-range header.

"I think we gave a good account of ourselves. We lost to two goals from free kicks which took deflections that our keeper couldn't do anything about," said Albacete coach Cesar Ferrero.

"But I'm happy with the team, we

were very disciplined tonight and showed that we can more-or-less hold our own with anybody."

Ferrero was clearly referring to the fact that his newly-promoted side were many pundits' pre-season favourites to make an immediate return to the second division but now look likely to survive.

With a budget of just 13 million euros, Albacete are the Spanish first division's most impoverished club.

The win gives Real Madrid 67 points from their 31 games, four points clear of their nearest rival Valencia, who have a game in hand.

Valencia play host to bottom club Murcia on Sunday, who have yet to win away from home this season.

One negative note for Real was that their Argentine utility man Santiago Solari picked up his fifth yellow card of the season and will have to sit out Real's match against Osasuna next week.

Barcelona's nine game winning streak, the second longest in the Catalan club's history, came to an end when they could only draw 0-0 with Villarreal.

Javier Saviola hit the post after 21 minutes but that was the closest Barca came to getting a goal, with Ronaldinho below form and mis-firing badly for the entire 90 minutes.

Former Barcelona player Roger Garcia hit the post for Villarreal just before the break.

Roger was among four ex-Barca players among the Villarreal team along with goalkeeper Jose Manuel Reina and striker Sonny Anderson and Juan Roman Riquelme.

Perhaps because they were trying to prove a point on their return to the Nou Camp, the quartet were Villarreal's best performers on the night.

Barca have 56 points but remain in fourth on goal difference from Deportivo La Coruna, who are at home to Real Betis on Sunday.

Earlier on Saturday, Sevilla bounced back from their 5-1 thrashing at Real Madrid last weekend and got a hard fought 1-0 win over Espanyol.

The only goal of the game came after 51 minutes when Antonino Ramiro slid in to push home a Dario Silva cross.



PHOTO: AFP

Roberto Carlos (C) is the toast of his Real Madrid mates after his second goal against Albacete at the Carlos Baelmonte Stadium in Albacete on April 3.

Premiership

Magpies stay on track

Football

AFP, London

Newcastle revived their Champions League challenge with a 4-2 Premiership win at home to Everton.

The result took Bobby Robson's side into fourth place, the last spot available to English clubs for next season's premier European club competition, two points clear of Liverpool, who play Blackburn on Sunday.

In other matches, Chelsea consolidated their grip on second place with a 1-0 win over London rivals Tottenham thanks to Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink's first-half goal at White Hart Lane.

Former England manager Robson was disappointed by the way his Newcastle side had let Everton back into the game when Joseph Yobo's header made it 3-2 with nine minutes remaining.

"Four-two sounds emphatic but at 3-2 we let Yobo in at the back post and we shouldn't be conceding goals like that," Robson told Sky Sports.

Meanwhile Everton manager David Moyes was angry with officials for chalking off a Steve Watson goal midway through the second-half for offside.

"It was a goal," insisted Moyes, whose team have won only once away from home this season. "All I can say is that we are due some luck."

But there were no complaints from Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri after his side ensured the fight for the Premier League crown remained a contest.

"The result, the performance, was very good," said the genial Italian, who has been repeatedly told in the British press that he is to be sacked in favour of England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson.

"We had chances to finish the match but if you don't score the second

goal the game is always open."

The result saw Chelsea close to within four points of leaders Arsenal, who earlier Sunday saw their bid for a third straight FA Cup triumph end with a 1-0 semi-final defeat by Manchester United.

At the other end of the table, Southampton's 4-1 win at Molineux kept Wolves in last place.

Birmingham's goalless draw away to Fulham kept them in the Champions League hunt on 46 points.

Elsewhere Middlesbrough beat Bolton 2-0 in a near repeat of February's League Cup Final which Boro won 2-1.

At St James' Park, former England striker Alan Shearer netted twice in an entertaining contest. Wales forward Craig Bellamy put Newcastle 1-0 up in the fifth minute before Thomas Gravesen pulled one back for Everton seven minutes later.

England midfielder Kieron Dyer restored Newcastle's lead in the 21st minute and, seven minutes after the break, Shearer's first goal appeared to have wrapped up the points for the hosts.

But Everton's Nigerian international Yobo gave Moyes's men a glimmer of hope with an 81st minute goal before Shearer's second in the final minute of normal time killed the game.

At White Hart Lane, in-form Chelsea forward Hasselbaink's 38th minute goal was good enough to give Ranieri's side all three points.

Meanwhile across London at Loftus Road, former Fulham keeper Maik Taylor denied his old club with a string of superb saves to earn Birmingham a precious point.

"At home we need to be picking up three points," said Fulham boss Chris Coleman. "Birmingham battled hard but over the 90 minutes I am a little disappointed with our attacking play."

But Bruce was happy enough with

a point. "We had nine of our players away on international duty, five played the whole 90 minutes. But they toughed it out on a horrible pitch."

Wolves's season suffered yet another setback with a thumping defeat at home to the Saints. England striker James Beattie sent the visitors on their way with a 25th minute strike before defender Claus Lundekvam's first goal in 296 appearances for the club, made it 2-0 just short of the hour mark.

Henri Camara pulled a goal back for Wolves in the 72nd minute as Dave Jones's team struggled to give their manager a win against his old club. But as they pressed for the equaliser, they conceded two goals in the final two minutes to England forward Kevin Phillips.

"If you make a wrong decision at this level you get punished as we keep finding out," said Jones after another error-strewn display.

Meanwhile Saints boss Paul Sturrock praised strikers Beattie and Phillips, saying: "I thought our front-men were superb."

At the Riverside Kevin Nolan's own goal gave Boro an eighth minute lead but Steve McClaren's men could not start to relax until former Manchester United midfielder Jonathan Greening netted in the 51st minute.

"Two goals a clean sheet and an important win. That says it all," said Boro boss Steve McClaren.



REBECCA LOOS