



PHOTO: AFP

England's Wayne Bridge slots the ball between Iceland's Ivar Ingimarsson and goalkeeper Arni Gatur Arason to make it 5-1 during the FA Summer tournament match at City of Manchester stadium on June 5.

England hit right notes

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sven-Goran Eriksson would never admit it but the England coach must have breathed a huge sigh of relief after watching his side thrash Iceland 6-1 in their final match before Euro 2004 kicks off this week.

The Swede has uncharacteristically chopped and changed his line-up in the final run-in to the tournament. But it all seemed worthwhile as England convincingly overcame Iceland with two goals each from Wayne Rooney and Darius Vassell and one apiece from Frank Lampard and Wayne Bridge.

It was the perfect tonic for a side that had been under pressure to produce a convincing performance after a hesitant display in the 1-1 draw with Japan in mid-week.

"There was pressure from the fans and the media. But we know what we have got in the squad," Liverpool striker Michael Owen admitted.

"We know we can produce on any given day so hopefully we can produce in Portugal."

Saturday's win represented a significant success for England's revamped midfield in which Steven Gerrard and Lampard operate in the centre with Paul Scholes on the left and David Beckham on the right.

Lampard had looked distinctly uncomfortable when asked to play at the base of a midfield diamond against Japan. But with greater freedom to get forward he capped an impressive display on Saturday.

Croatia down Denmark

Reuters, Copenhagen

Croatia beat Denmark 2-1 away in the two teams' final warm-up on Saturday before the start of Euro 2004 in Portugal next weekend.

Striker Tomislav Sokota lobbed Denmark keeper Thomasson Sorenson after 27 minutes to put the Croats ahead against their lacklustre hosts at the Parken Stadium.

Croatia went two up just before halftime when Ivica Olic crisply headed into the net from Nenad Bjelica's corner kick.

Denmark came out a different team in the second half and substitute Ebbe Sand put the 1992 European champions back in the game when he scored in the 56th minute.

Sand had been denied a few minutes earlier when Croatia's Stipe Pletikosa saved a shot from just inside the penalty box.

Sand, who is normally behind AC Milan's Jon Dahl Tomasson and PSV Eindhoven's Dennis Rommedahl in the pecking order, will have improved his chances of making the starting line-up in Portugal after Saturday's performance.

Danish coach Morten Olsen said afterwards his team had not played well in the first half.

"If we play like we did in the first half, we don't belong in Portugal," said Olsen.

"But from the second half we know we have a team that can win the first three games."

Croatia are in Group B of Euro 2004 with Switzerland, champions France and England. Denmark are in Group C with Bulgaria, Sweden and Italy.

Irish inflict Dutch pain

Football

AFP, Amsterdam

Holland were booted off by their fans after slipping up 1-0 to the Republic of Ireland in their final warm-up ahead of the European Championships here on Saturday.

AC Milan's Clarence Seedorf picked up a thigh injury and had to come off with a quarter of an hour remaining but Dutch coach Dick Advocaat is hopeful the setback will not have any impact on the player's availability in Portugal.

"He's feeling slight pain, but it doesn't look too serious and shouldn't affect Clarence's participation at the Euro," said Advocaat.

Despite the strike power of Manchester United hitman Ruud van Nistelrooy and Patrick Kluivert the Dutch were unable to break down the Irish defence, getting caught out by Robbie Keane in the first half.

The Tottenham striker picked up a pass from Andy Reid and unopposed by the Dutch defence sailed past Fulham's Edwin van der Saar in goal.

In the second half, Advocaat replaced the two strikers with midfielders Andy van der Meyde and Arje Robben. Bayern Munich's Roy Makaay was also introduced in an attempt to break the Irish but despite dominating they were unable to find the equaliser.

This was the Netherlands' second defeat in a week, they were beaten by the same margin by Belgium in Eindhoven last Saturday.

The Dutch are in Group D in

Euro 2004 pitted against the Czech Republic, Latvia and Germany, their first opponents. Advocaat's squad leave for Portugal on Tuesday.

For the Republic this was another positive performance after



PHOTO: AFP

WHOSE BALL IS IT? Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (R) vies with an Irish player during their international friendly at the Amsterdam Arena on June 5.

The last generation



AFP, Lisbon,

Portugal's golden generation, comprising the likes of Luis Figo, Rui Costa and Fernando Couto, have their last chance to win a major football finals in Euro 2004 on home soil which begins next Saturday.

The current squad have been touted at home and abroad as potential world-beaters since they lifted the 1989 and 1991 world youth championships under future and now former Real Madrid coach Carlos Queiroz.

Having grafted Brazil's 2002 World Cup-winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari on to their wagon, the Portuguese hope some of the flair that his former team showed two years ago in Japan and South Korea will rub off on them.

The predominance of a once Eusebio-inspired Benfica has all but disappeared over the past three decades but Porto stunned Bayern Munich to put the country back on

the European map in 1987.

And last month's success over Monaco, coming after Jose Mourinho's artful side had knocked out Manchester United against all the odds, has again lifted the Portuguese game to dizzy heights.

"At Euro 2004 we will be up against rival teams whom we must respect -- but we must not fear them," Scolari said last week.

Scolari will supply six members of their team to the national squad and Portuguese Football Federation president Gilberto Madal believes they will be able to transfer their winning mentality to their colleagues.

"I think that FC Porto have given us a huge boost - and I hope it will help motivate the national team even further," says Madal.

Defenders Nuno Valente, Paulo Ferreira and Ricardo Carvalho and midfield stars Deco, Costinha and Maniche will all be in the mix, while goalscoring duties are likely to fall on the shoulders of Paris St

Germain striker Pauleta.

One surprise is the omission of Porto keeper Vitor Baia to his squad.

Baia is the only Portuguese player to have won the three most important trophies in European club football: the Cup Winners' Cup with Barcelona (1997), the UEFA Cup with FC Porto (2003) and the Champions League with FC Porto.

But Scolari preferred Ricardo Pereira of Sporting Lisbon, Sporting Braga's Joaquim "Quim" Silva and Benfica's Moreira ahead of the veteran.

Scolari will hope that what does not look on paper the deepest of squads can avoid injury and suspension to erase the memories of the World Cup and the heartbreaking Euro 2000 semi-final loss to France.

Along the way he will hope that fresh talents such as Manchester United's player of the year Cristiano Ronaldo will take to the stage with aplomb.

Easy win for Spain

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain eased their way to a comfortable 4-0 win over Andorra in Getafe on Saturday in their final warm-up before departing for Euro 2004.

First-half strikes from Fernando Morientes and Ruben Baraja, a second-half header from centre back Cesar and a fine individual goal from Juan Carlos Valeron meant Spain ended their week-long training camp on a high.

"I was able to make some positive conclusions from this game and the best thing of all was the effort shown by the players," coach Inaki Saez said.

Metsu in a mess

REUTERS, Seoul

Former Senegal coach Bruno Metsu could be left jobless after pay negotiations with the Korea Football Association (KFA) stalled last week.

The Frenchman, manager of Asian champions Al Ain, has been told to "stay away" from the UAE club's president after Metsu made it known he wanted to coach South Korea.

Al Ain president Mohamed bin-Zayed Al-Nahyan told Arab media over the weekend that Metsu was no longer welcome, even if talks with the KFA broke down completely.

Portugal sail past Lithuania

REUTERS, Setubal (Portugal)

Portugal eased to a 4-1 victory over Lithuania on Saturday in a satisfying final warm-up match before they begin their quest for a home victory at Euro 2004.

A header from Fernando Couto and a deft finish from Paula Resende put Luis Figo Scolari's side 2-0 up by the 13th minute.

Lithuania got a goal back after 74 minutes with a penalty from Donatas Vencevicius but Nuno Gomes scored with nine minutes to go and Helder Postiga headed in injury time to complete a comfortable win for the home side.

Scolari fielded what is likely to be his starting line-up when the hosts get the tournament underway with a Group A match against Greece on June 12 in Porto.

Portugal were ahead as early as the third minute when Luis Figo swung over a corner and Couto headed in at the near post.

Pauleta latched on to a long clearance over the top from goalkeeper Ricardo Pereira to make it 2-0 in the simplest of styles and with better finishing Scolari's side would have scored many more.

Lithuania had one chance at the end of the first half, Ricardo making a smart save from Roberto Poskus, and the visitors eventually pulled one back when Beto Severo mistimed a tackle on Poskus, Vencevicius blasting in the penalty.

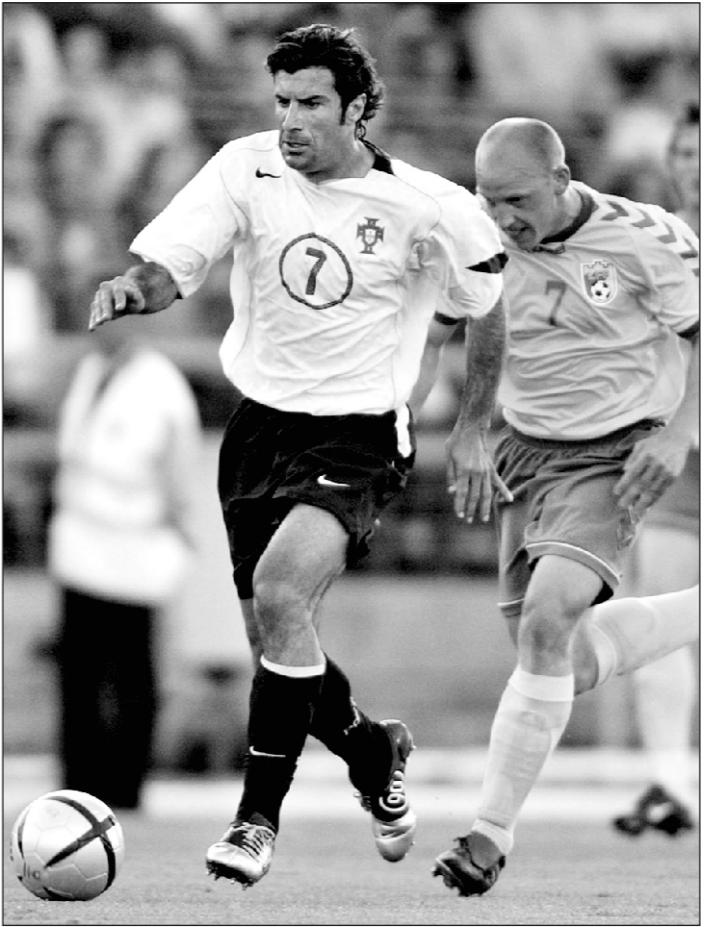


PHOTO: AFP

CATCH ME! Portuguese superstar Luis Figo (L) goes on a run while Aurelijus Skarbalis of Lithuania chases him during their friendly encounter at Setubal stadium in Portugal on Saturday.

2006 WC qualifier Kiwis stay alive

AFP, Adelaide

New Zealand kept in the hunt for the 2006 World Cup qualifying race with a make-or-break 2-0 win over Fiji in their Oceania Nations Cup match here on Sunday.

Joe Cole should have added to it within a minute but side-footed wide from 10 yards after being set up by Kieron Dyer.

Eidur Gudjohnsen produced Iceland's best effort shortly afterwards, grazing the top of the bar with a fierce strike.

But this was to be England's afternoon. Bridge opened his international account after running on to Emile Heskey's knock-down to finish a move he had started himself and Vassell rounded things off with a well-placed finish from the edge of the area after a neat one-two with Heskey.

Ledley King had a header cleared off the line by Thordur Gudjohnsen before Vassell connected with the impressive Owen Hargreaves' left-foot shot to restore England's three-goal lead.

Joe Cole should have added to it within a minute but side-footed wide from 10 yards after being set up by Kieron Dyer.

Eidur Gudjohnsen produced Iceland's best effort shortly afterwards, grazing the top of the bar with a fierce strike.

But this was to be England's afternoon. Bridge opened his international account after running on to Emile Heskey's knock-down to finish a move he had started himself and Vassell rounded things off with a well-placed finish from the edge of the area after a neat one-two with Heskey.

Today we needed a result and we got it, without being flashy we did only deserved the win, we did enough, and we're obviously happy with that, New Zealand coach Mick Waitt said.

New Zealand opened the scoring in just the eighth minute with a Che Bunce far post header off a free kick.

But despite numerous good opportunities to build on that lead the score remained 1-0 at halftime.

The Kiwis had some frights before a goalkick set up striker Vaughan Coveney for a goal on the counter-attack in the 56th minute.

The same two teams will also play off in October this year for a berth in the 2005 Confederations Cup.

But they lined up against Congo without suspended striker El-Hadj Diouf and talismanic midfielder Khalilou Fadiga, who has not fully

recovered from heart surgery.

Victory was essential for French coach Guy Stephan, fired by the national football federation after losing to hosts Tunisia in a stormy 2004 African Nations Cup quarter-final.

Stephan, who succeeded World Cup hero and compatriot Bruno Metsu, received a stay of execution because the sports ministry contributes to his salary and did not support the move.

A man with a frown on his face at the best of times, Stephan endured 58 anxious minutes as only Henri Camara from English Division One club Wolves threatened to break the deadlock.

Several early second half corners bore no fruit either and it was left to France-based defender Lamine Diatta to show the strike force how it is done as he scored with 58 minutes gone.

The goal that sealed success came after 77 minutes from Moussa Ndiaye, one of many Lions who play professionally in France, and a Congolese side geared to defend never seriously threatened to hit back.

Senegal lead Group 1 on goal difference from Zambia, who trounced Togo 1-0 in Lusaka thanks to an early goal from Jacob Mulenga, one of several Olympic squad members elevated to the senior team.

Super Swedes outplay Poland

REUTERS, Stockholm

Sweden outclassed Poland 3-1 with goals by Henrik Larsson, Andreas Jakobsson and Marcus Allback in a warm-up friendly on Saturday, their last before the European championship.

Larsson, who announced his return to the national team in April, gave Sweden the lead in the 41st minute after Liverpool goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek had made several spectacular saves in the first half.

The Swedes came on even stronger in the second half and defender Jakobsson made it 2-0 in the 54th minute with a precise header from a corner kick by midfielder Kim Kallstrom.

Dudek made a rare mistake in the 72nd minute when he tried to tip the ball away but instead sent it straight to substitute Allback two metres out and the Aston Villa striker fired Sweden's third.

Poland got a consolation goal in the 89th minute with a header by substitute Damian Goralski.

Sweden, who beat Finland 3-1 eight days ago, are drawn with Italy, Denmark and Bulgaria in Group C at Euro 2004.



PHOTO: AFP

Senegal's Habib Beye (L) jumps over a sliding tackle by Congo's Kimbenba Mbizi in their 2006 World Cup qualifier in Dakar on June 5.