

Starring strikers

AFP, Paris



Deadly hitmen Michael Owen and Thierry Henry stunningly shot down rumours of their international demise on Wednesday as both men found the target to keep their countries on the road to the 2006 World Cup finals.

Owen, skipper for the day in the absence of the suspended David Beckham, scored the only goal of the game as England beat Azerbaijan 1-0 in windswept Baku while Henry added France's second goal in a 2-0 win against Cyprus.

It was a golden night for World Cup strikers throughout Europe as Manchester United's Ruud van Nistelrooy returned to the Dutch side and scored twice in a 3-1 win over Finland while Robbie Keane set a new Irish scoring record with a brace in the 2-0 win over the Faroes in Dublin.

In Parma, Francesco Totti put his critics in their place as he also grabbed two as Italy squeezed past Belarus 4-3.

Stand-in skipper Owen's 28th goal for England was enough to secure a 1-0 win over Azerbaijan and keep England on top of Group Six with 10 points from four matches.

The Real Madrid striker rose to joint eighth in his country's all-time scoring charts by heading home Ashley Cole's cross midway through the first half.

"It was a great ball from Ashley but it was difficult because the ball was swirling about all over the place," said Owen.

"It was important for us to win the game, that's the main thing. The fact I scored was secondary. A game is not just about scoring. I can play well and not score."

Henry also made it 28 interna-

tional goals as he and Sylvain Wiltord found the net to see off an awkward Cyprus in Nicosia.

It was only Henry's third international goal in his last 11 matches compared to seven goals in eight matches for club side Arsenal this season.

France are now in second spot in Group 4 behind Republic of Ireland, who beat Faroe Islands 2-0 in Dublin, on goal difference.

When asked about his lack of goals, Henry said: "My lack of goals has worried you more than me. It hasn't prevented me from sleeping. This team is in the process of creating something and we will continue to work towards that end."

Robbie Keane set a new international goal-scoring record for Ireland, hitting his 22nd and 23rd goals for his country.

The 24-year-old Tottenham striker had been level in the all-time scoring charts with Niall Quinn going into the game but claimed the record all for himself on his 56th appearance when he slotted home a 14th minute penalty after Jon Roi Jacobsen had fouled Damien Duff in the box.

"It's brilliant, a great feeling," said Keane.

"When I was a kid, I used to dream of playing and scoring for my country but to get the record is unbelievably special."

Goals in either half from Van Nistelrooy lifted the Netherlands to a 3-1 win over Finland in Group One in Amsterdam.

Finland had opened the scoring after 14 minutes through Teemu Tainio.

Van Nistelrooy's early-season hernia operation meant he missed Holland's first two World Cup qualifiers against Liechtenstein and the Czech Republic, and he was returning Wednesday after sitting out a two-match suspension.

But the 28-year-old showed he was back in form helping set up the

equaliser which midfielder Wesley Sneijder netted five minutes from half-time.

A minute later, van Nistelrooy gave the hosts the lead and then claimed his second after 63 minutes.

Francesco Totti silenced his critics by scoring twice as Italy reclaimed top spot in Group Five with a 4-3 win over Belarus in Parma.

Totti, much maligned after his poor performance in last Saturday's defeat at Slovenia, opened the scoring from the penalty spot before Roma team-mate Daniele de Rossi doubled the home side's advantage.

The visitors hit back through Maxim Romashchenko's stunning 40-yard shot only for Totti to restore Italy's two-goal cushion with a venomous free-kick.

Belarus refused to lie down and Vitaly Bulyga kept them in the hunt before Alberto Gilardino struck with a close range header four minutes from time for his first senior international goal.

Romashchenko ensured a nail-biting finale by curling a free-kick in off the bar with a minute to go.

"Totti is a crucial player for Italy and has to a lot of pressure on his shoulders," said Italy defender Gianluca Zambrotta.

"But he can cope with the responsibility and he has proved what he can do."

Elsewhere, Berti Vogts future as Scotland manager looked even more bleak after a 1-1 draw in Chisnau against Moldova.

The night's biggest scorers were Portugal who crushed Russia 7-1 in Lisbon with Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo scoring twice while there were also plenty of smiles in the tiny principality of Andorra as they beat Macedonia 1-0 to register their first ever official win after 30 successive defeats.



PHOTO:AFP

England's Michael Owen celebrates after scoring against Azerbaijan in a World Cup qualifier in Baku on October 13.

USA, Mexico, Guatemala thru'

AFP, Washington



United States, Mexico and Guatemala advanced to next year's North American final round World Cup 2006 qualifying

with shutout triumphs Wednesday, leaving seven nations to fight over three remaining spots.

Eddie Johnson came off the American bench to score three times after US captain Landon Donovan forged a two-goal lead in a 6-0 rout of Panama here that clinched the Group One title for the 2002 World Cup quarter-finalists.

"It's going to get a lot harder," Donovan said.

"Teams are still finding themselves in this round. In the next round they know what's at stake. Playing to get to the World Cup makes it that much harder. It's everyone's dream."

Carlos Ruiz scored in the 44th minute to give host Guatemala a 1-0 victory over Honduras. Guatemala can finish no worse than second in Group Two with Costa Rica and Honduras vying for the other berth.

Host Mexico remained perfect at 4-0 and all-but clinched the Group Three crown by blanking Trinidad and Tobago 3-0 on goals by Antonio Naelson in the 19th minute and Jaime Lozano in the 55th and 85th minutes.

Other matches saw Jamaica and El Salvador play to a goal-less draw at Kingston, Costa Rica down host Canada 3-1 and St. Vincent/Grenadines stay in contention with a 3-0 road victory that eliminated St. Kitts and Nevis.

Final matches in all groups are November 17. Three of the six teams advancing the next year's event will advance to Germany in 2006 while a fourth will play against Asia's fifth-place team for another World Cup finals spot.

The Jamaicans are second in Group One at six points with Panama at five and El Salvador at four as all fight for one spot. Panama will host El Salvador in a showdown finish. Jamaica must visit a US team on a 12-match unbeaten streak.

"Jamaica hopes we play a 'B' team in that game but they'll be disappointed," US defender Gregg Berhalter said. "We want to win and keep our momentum going."

In Group Two, host Honduras must beat Costa Rica in the final game to have any chance to advance. Guatemala can seal the group crown on home soil by beating winless and eliminated Canada.

The unbeaten Mexicans need only one draw in matches Nov. 13 and 17 with St. Kitts and Nevis to claim the group while Trinidad and Tobago need only a home draw to eliminate St. Vincent/Grandines and advance.

AFP, Hong Kong



South Korea, who were World Cup semifinalists in 2002, drew 1-1 against Lebanon on Wednesday to leave their hopes of making the 2006 finals in

Germany on a knife-edge.

China too face an anxious finale after losing 1-0 in Kuwait but there were no problems for Japan who booked their place in the final Asian qualifying round with a 1-0 win against Oman in Muscat.

Choi Jin-Cheul gave the Koreans the perfect start in Beirut after just eight minutes with a drive from the edge of the area which beat Ziad AbdeIsamad in goal.

But their hopes of a goal avalanche never materialised despite them dominating the early stages of the tie and they were stunned when the home side levelled in the 27th minute much to the delight of the 20,000 crowd.

Ali Naserreddine was the scorer nipping in from a defender and goalkeeper Lee Woon-Jae to put his team back on equal terms.

South Korea continued to dominate the proceedings with 2002 World Cup star Ahn Jung-Hwan having two chances to settle the match but first he was denied by the goalkeeper and then watched in agony as another effort came back off the crossbar.

South Korea, who have made every World Cup finals since 1986, still top Group Seven with a one point lead over Lebanon.

They face Maldives in their final match on November 17 while Lebanon take on Vietnam with just the group winners assured of a place in the eight-nation final qualifying round.

China too face a nervous last round of matches after Waleed Ali scored a 48th minute goal to give Kuwait a 1-0 win over the Asian Cup runners-up in Group Four.

Kuwait and China both have 12 points from five matches but the Gulf side have the better goal difference.

In the final round of games on November 17, Kuwait face Malaysia, who have lost all of their matches so far, while China take on Hong Kong.

The Kuwaitis attacked from the outset and Bachar Abdallah, set up by Mohammad Jaragh, had the best chance of the first half but he saw his 30th minute effort well saved by Liu Yunfei in the China goal.

Moments later, Hao Haidong just missed the target for China.

But the half-time decision to bring off Nawaf Humaidan and put on Walid paid off with the replacement grabbing the vital goal from Abdallah's pass.

In fact, Kuwait could have added to their total in the 49th and 74th minutes respectively but both Abdallah and Hussein Saraj were denied by Lui.

In the closing stages, China coach Arie Haan threw on Manchester City star Sun Jihai for Sun Xiang but the change came too late to make a difference.

Saudi Arabia, who have made the last three finals, wrapped up Group Eight on Tuesday and they

were joined in the next round on Wednesday by Japan, Uzbekistan and North Korea.

Japan beat Oman in Muscat in Group Three with a goal from Takayuki Suzuki in the 51st minute enough to put Zico's team in the next stage.

Suzuki's vital goal came when he met Shunsuke Nakamuras cross with a powerful header.

"We showed excellent mental strength and technique," said Zico. "All the players did their jobs and we deserve to go through to the next round."

Group One will be decided on the final day after Iran came from behind to beat Qatar 3-2 in Doha and Jordan beat Laos by the same score.

Bayern Munich striker Vahid Hashemian scored the winner in the last minute to keep Iran on course for their third finals appearance after making it all the way in 1978 and 1998.

Ali Karimi was also on target twice and Iran, who face Laos in their final match, will be favourites to progress as they have a far superior goal difference.

Iraq, whose Under-23 team made the Olympic Games semifinals in August, were unable to repeat the magic Wednesday with a 2-1 defeat in Amman at the hands of Uzbekistan in Group Two ending their hopes.

Maksim Shatskikh with a 10th minute opener and Alexander Geynrikh, in the 22nd minute, put the Uzbekis in control with Qusai Munir's 74th minute reply proving to be just a consolation for Iraq.

To compound Iraq's misery, they had Haidar Jabar sent-off in the 69th minute.

Uzbekistan have 13 points from

five Group Two matches, five ahead of Iraq.

North Korea wrapped-up Group Five with a 2-1 win in Pyongyang against Yemen to take their tally to 11 points and an unassailable four-point lead over closest rivals United Arab Emirates who lost 3-0 to Thailand in Bangkok.

STANDINGS

AFP, Paris

Standings in the European qualifying zone for the 2006 World Cup finals after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, goals for, goals against, points):

Group One										
Romania	4	3	0	1	9	4	9			
Finland	5	3	0	2	10	6	9			
Holland	3	2	1	0	7	3	7			
Czech Republic	3	2	0	1	4	2	6			
Macedonia	4	1	1	2	6	5	4			
Andorra	3	1	0	2	2	8	3			
Armenia	4	0	0	4	1	11	0			

Group Two										
Ukraine	4	2	2	0	6	3	8			
Turkey	4	1	3	0	6	2	6			
Albania	4	2	0	2	3	5	6			
Denmark	3	1	2	0	4	2	5			
Georgia	3	1	1	1	3	3	4			
Greece	3	0	2	1	2	3	2			
Kazakhstan	3	0	0	3	1	7	0			

Group Three										
Portugal	4	3	1	0	15	3	10			
Slovakia	4	3	1	0	15	3	10			
Estonia	4	2	1	1	8	7	7			
Russia	3	1	1	1	6	8	4			
Latvia	4	1	1	2	7	11	4			
Liechtenstein	4	1	1	2	7	11	4			
Luxembourg	5	0	0	5	4	19	0			

Group Four										
Rep of Ireland	4	2	2	0	6	1	8			
France	4	2	2	0	4	0	8			
Switzerland	3	1	2	0	9	3	5			
Israel	3	1	2	0	4	3	5			
Cyprus	4	0	1	3	3	9	1			
Faroe Islands	4	0	1	3	2	12	1			

Group Five										
Italy	4	3	0	1	7	5	9			
Norway	4	2	1	1	6	3	7			
Slovenia	4	2	1	1	4	3	7			
Belarus	3	1	1	1	8	5	4			
Scotland	3	0	2	1	1	2	2			
Moldova	4	0	1	3	1	9	1			

Group Six										
England	4	3	1	0	7	3	10			
Poland	4	3	0	1	10	5	9			
Austria	4	1	2	1	8	8	5			
Northern Ireland	4	0	0	3	1	5	8	3		
Wales	4	0	2	2	5	8	2			
Azerbaijan	4	0	2	2	1	4	2			

Group Seven										
Serbia-Montenegro	7	3	2	1	0	8	0			
Lithuania	3	1	2	0	5	1	5			
Spain	3	1	2	0	3	1	5			
Bosnia	2	0	2	0	1	1	2			
Belgium	2	0	1	1	1	3	1			
San Marino	3	0	0	3	0	12	0			

Group Eight										
Sweden	4	3	0	1	14	2	9			
Bulgaria	3	2	1	0	9	4	7			
Croatia	3	2	1	0	6	2	7			
Hungary	3	1	0	2	3	8	3			
Iceland	4	0	1	3	4	10	1			
Malta	3	0	1	2	1	11	1			

AFP, Montevideo



World champions Brazil and Argentina hit out at defensive Colombia and Chile after failing to score in South American qualifying for the

2006 World Cup.

Group leaders Brazil never found a way through seventh-placed Colombia's packed midfield while Argentina found Chile just as water-tight.

"They're a skilful side and kept possession well so it was very frustrating," Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira said.

"When one team doesn't want to play, you don't have a game. We tried everything but we couldn't break down their defence. They came looking for a point and they got it."

Parreira also criticised Uruguayan referee Jorge Larrionda for allowing Colombia to get away with a string of

fouls.

"They could have had two or three yellow cards early on but they got away with it and that only encouraged them to mark us very roughly," he said.

Ronaldo, who missed two good chances, admitted better finishing would have won the match.

"We dominated the whole game. They never put us in danger but we didn't take our chances," he said.

Argentina coach Jose Pekerman admitted fifth-placed Chile had surprised him.

"They put under pressure in the first half and we survived some difficult moments," he said.

Argentina, second in the table, never produced the flowing football which saw them beat Uruguay 4-2 last Saturday.

"We just couldn't sustain any momentum, partly because of our opponents and partly because we our passing was below par," Pekerman added.

Bolivia and Uruguay played out



PHOTO:AFP

Brazilian striker Ronaldo attempts to score leaving two Colombian players in his wake during their South American World Cup 2006 qualifier on October 13.