



PHOTO: AP

Argentina's Hernan Crespo (9) starts celebrating after scoring against Germany during their friendly at the LTU Arena stadium in Dusseldorf on February 9.

# Zagorakis Greece's hero

## Crespo denies Germany

### Football

AFP, Paris

Euro 2004 champions Greece kept their hopes alive of making the 2006 World Cup finals as inspired by fever-ridden captain Theo Zagorakis' first goal in over 100 appearances they saw off Denmark 2-1 on Wednesday.

While their Group 2 leaders Ukraine beat Albania 2-0 to hold a six point lead the Greeks have a game in hand.

While they plugged on with their World Cup campaign most of the other key European nations played friendlies and came out mostly with draws. England were held by an under strength Holland 0-0, Germany drew 2-2 at home to Argentina and France went down to their fifth successive home draw with Sweden, the hosts coming from behind to end the match 1-1.

There were impressive wins for the Republic of Ireland, who saw off Euro 2004 finalists Portugal 1-0 through Andy O'Brien's first ever international goal, Italy came out 2-0 victors over Russia.

Craig Bellamy, the bete noire of Newcastle manager Graeme Souness and now Celtic property, showed no signs of lack of match fitness as he scored twice to give John Toshack a winning start to his second reign as Wales manager in a

2-0 victory over Hungary.

The less said the better over Northern Ireland's 1-0 defeat to 10-man Canada as they found themselves literally oceans part with Olivier Océan's first-half effort being enough to maintain the hosts miserable home record of not having won at Windsor Park in 11 games.

In Athens meanwhile Zagorakis' goal and a penalty by Angelos Basinas in the 32nd minute gave Greece a 2-0 lead while Danish winger Dennis Rommedahl in injury-time of the first-half provided Denmark's sole response.

Two key saves by Greek goalie Antonis Nikopolidis late in the contest from shots by Jon Dahl Tomasson enabled the Euro 2004 champions to hold on.

Zagorakis, who earned a move to Serie A outfit Bologna on the back of his Euro 2004 performances, netted with a low and curving free kick that broke through the Danish wall and the ball crept in just inside the right hand post past motionless goalie Thomas Sorensen.

The penalty came about when Bolton midfielder Stelios Giannakopoulos was held up twice in the penalty area by Real Madrid's Thomas Gravesen and finally brought down.

A mistake by Nikopolidis just seconds before the end of the first half in clearing the ball in front of his goal cost Greece as an opportunistic Rommedahl was there to easily

put the ball in the empty net and put the visitors back in the contest.

One consolation for France was they scored their first goal in over four matches through David Trezeguet - taking him to joint second in the all-time French scorers list on 30 - while Sweden had taken the lead through Freddie Ljungberg celebrating his 50th appearance for the visitors.

The hosts had a late effort by Thierry Henry ruled out while his Arsenal team-mate Patrick Vieira was fortunate to stay on the pitch in the first-half after blatantly elbowing Marcus Allback.

Although the final whistle was greeted with boos by the home fans there was much to be optimistic about after an impressive first-half display which coach Raymond Domenech seized on.

"It was good," said Domenech, who has virtually had to rebuild the team since taking over from Jacques Santini after they went out of Euro 2004 in the quarter-finals.

"We suffered a bit to start with against a good side but we showed good things and we are definitely evolving.

"We were maybe not as fresh in the second-half.

"I tell you what though if we could have a 10-0 win we would take it!" Germany's miserable run against top nations continued as Argentina twice came from behind to grab a draw.

AC Milan striker Hernan Crespo

showed his killer instinct in front of goal converting a penalty and producing a magestic late chip to deny Germany.

Torsten Frings put the 2002 World Cup finalists in front after 28 minutes, before Crespo levelled, and Brazilian-born Kevin Kuranyi restored Germany's lead until Crespo's late intervention.

The draw means Germany have not defeated a top nation in over four and half years with October 2000 the last time Germany triumphed over one of the big guns.

German coach Jurgen Klinsmann, though, was satisfied. "We want to carry on our development and I believe the Argentina game was another good building block," explained Klinsmann. "We want to orientate our game around attack and I think that showed once again."

Alberto Gilardino and Simone Barone scored after coming on as second-half substitutes to give Italy their victory over Russia in a lively match.

Barone's 25 yard thunderbolt was the pick of the goals and certainly had the Palermo midfielder feeling over the moon.

This is an unforgettable day for me and I dedicate my first Italy goal to my family," he said.

What Domenech would dedicate his first victory at the Stade de France to is anybody's guess but at the moment he looks like he might have to sell his soul to get one.

# Ronaldo hires private jet for mates

AFP, Madrid

Brazil's World Cup star Ronaldo was reported Thursday to have hired a private jet to fly his Real Madrid team-mates to a French chateau for his Valentine's Day wedding to Brazilian model Daniela Cicarelli.

The former World Player of the Year has invited 250 guests for next Monday's ceremony and party at Chantilly chateau, north of Paris, sports daily Marca reports.

The list of guests should include England captain David Beckham, French star Zinedine Zidane, Real captain Raul, Brazil's world famous left-back Roberto Carlos and England striker Michael Owen.

Ronaldo Luiz Nazario de Lima, 28, will be marrying for the second time.

He was also expected to invite former team-mates from his old club Inter Milan.

However, he has barred the media from the ceremony.

# Rookies fire Italy

AFP, Cagliari

Alberto Gilardino and Simone Barone scored after coming on as second-half substitutes to give Italy a 2-0 win over Russia in a lively international friendly here on Wednesday.

After a goalless first-half in which Italy twice hit the woodwork, Parma striker Gilardino broke the deadlock, firing home a right-footed shot from an acute angle.

Palermo midfielder Barone increased Italy's lead shortly afterwards with a spectacular 25-yard thunderbolt that hit the inside of the post before crossing the line.

The match was held at Cagliari's Sant'Elia stadium in honour of Italian legend and current national team general manager Gigi Riva, whose 21 goals in 28 games helped the Sardinian club to their one and only Serie A title in the 1969/70 season.

Riva, whose robust style and powerful shot earned him the nickname 'Rombo di Tuono (Sound of Thunder), also scored 35 goals in 42 matches for Italy.

A ceremony took place prior to kick-off in which Cagliari retired the number 11 shirt which Riva used to wear.

# Bahrain hold Iran

AFP, Manama

Iranian goalkeeper Ibrahim Mirzapour played a blinder to see the Asian giants to a 0-0 draw against Bahrain in their opening 2006 World Cup finals second stage qualifier here on Wednesday.

In a generally scrappy encounter Iran will be pleased to have come away with a point as it was on this ground in the last match of the 2002 World Cup qualifiers that they were beaten 3-1 and saw their chances of automatic qualification disappear.

Saudi Arabia took that spot while Iran went on to lose to Ireland in the play-off.

# Robinho says it's Real

### Football

AP, Hong Kong

Brazil striker Robinho for the first time acknowledged he received an offer to play for Real Madrid, local media reported on Wednesday.

"They made an official offer and had a meeting with Santos club directors," the international told the Folha de San Paulo newspaper.

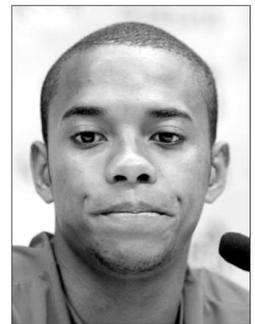
Robinho, who would not elaborate on the negotiations, made his comments to Brazilian reporters before scoring in Brazil's 7-1 trouncing of host Hong Kong in a friendly on Wednesday.

Media in Spain and Brazil have reported Madrid was close to signing a \$US23 million (\$A30.04 million) deal with Robinho, who would not confirm any offer until now.

In January, Robinho's agent Juan Figger said the move would take place only after the Spanish league season ends on June 30 because Madrid already holds its maximum quota of three non-European Union players - Brazilians Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos and Argentine Walter Samuel.

Santos denied it has been negotiating with the Spanish club.

"It's not true, Robinho shouldn't have said that (he received an offer)," club spokesman Aldo Neto told The Associated Press by telephone. "Santos has not been in contact with Real Madrid."



ROBINHO

But Roberto Carlos is convinced Robinho's future is with Real. The pair are close friends and

Roberto Carlos is confident that Santos winger Robinho will be a success in Europe.

"Clearly it would be great to see him at Real Madrid," Roberto Carlos told AS. "But also it is important to respect the contract that he still has with Santos."

"In my opinion he has already done a lot with Santos: he has won titles, has represented Santos in the Brazilian national team... I believe that the moment to leave is going to soon arrive."

"I am sure if the day comes for him to leave Santos, (president) Florentino Perez will open the doors to him so that he joins us at Real Madrid. At the moment we are the best team in the world and the president has said whenever the best players become available they must join the best team in the world."

Robinho is one of the best players to come out of Brazil in recent years, and soccer commentators say his transfer to an European club is imminent. If he joins Madrid, he will be reunited with former Santos coach Vanderlei Luxemburgo, who led the club to the 2004 Brazilian championship in December.

# North win hearts

AFP, Tokyo



North Korea have vowed to keep on attacking hard for a place in the World Cup after a 40-year absence, unperturbed by a nail-biting 2-1 loss

away to Asian champions and political enemies Japan.

"They proved stronger than we imagined," Japan Football Association president Saburo Kawabuchi said Thursday, the morning after his side won their opening match in Asia's last-eight World Cup qualifying round.

"They attacked hard with physical sharpness. They resembled South Korea," he said of North Korea's 18-strong squad, a dozen of whom belonged to the military-run April 25 Sport Club. "Each of them had solid skills."

Coming out of the secrecy which surrounded their training camp in China, North Korea tied the score in the 61st minute when Nam Song-Chol banged in a left-footer on a counter attack.

But the visitors collapsed to the ground in disbelief when substitute forward Masashi Oguro scored the winner for Japan in injury time before a noisy but peaceful crowd at the Saitama Stadium in Tokyo's northern suburbs.

"At half-time, I ordered the team to play offensive soccer. This stance will never change," Korean coach Yun Jong-Su, a former captain and striker in the 1990s, said after the match.

"I never thought of settling for a 1-1 draw. We tried to score a goal, because to attack is the best defence," said Yun, who guided North Korea out of the football wilderness since he became coach last year.

North Korea will face fast-improving Bahrain at home on March 25 when Japan fight powerhouse Iran away in the next qualifiers.

Japan coach Zico admitted the match against North Korea was "quite tough." "We were baffled by their counter attacks from tight

defence," he said.

North Korea have proved formidable in the second half. Out of the 11 goals they scored in the preliminary qualifying round last year, nine came after half-time, contributing to their three wins, two draws and one loss.

North Korea -- renowned for their heroic 1-0 win over favoured Italy in 1966 in their only World Cup finals - skipped qualifiers for the 1998 and 2002 editions after losing miserably to Japan and South Korea in the last-eight round for the 1994 finals in the United States.

North Korea's persistent performance drew praise from Japanese media which had labeled them as "mysterious," amid political tensions over the Stalinist state's kidnapping of Japanese citizens during the Cold War years.

"The mysterious team has finally come out of the shroud," said the conservative Sankei Shimbun.

"Given their long absence from international matches, there had been speculation that their play would be

far behind world football standards," it said. "But the North Korean football that surfaced under beams of Saitama Stadium betrayed such a guess completely."

Despite unusually tight security with 3,400 riot police and private guards on hand, a capacity crowd of the 64,000-seat Saitama Stadium was peaceful as they exchanged yells: "Nippon, Nippon" ("Japan, Japan") and "Igyora, Chosun" ("Go for it, Korea").

"The match developed in a very friendly atmosphere," the Korean coach said.

A section of 4,700 ethnic Koreans waved red placards as they were separated by buffer zones from a sea of blue of Japanese supporters.

No supporters and journalists came from the impoverished North for the match which was not broadcast or reported live in Pyongyang, amid preparations for the "Great Leader" Kim Jong-Il's 63rd birthday next week.

# USA, Mexico on course

AFP, Port-of-Spain

Regional powers the United States and Mexico signaled their intentions with valuable away wins on Wednesday as the final round of 2006 World Cup qualifying began in the North and Central America and Caribbean region.

Eddie Johnson's goal in the first half and Eddie Lewis's in the second lifted the United States to a 2-1 victory over Trinidad and Tobago.

Jaime Lozano scored two goals in as many minutes for Mexico, who defeated Costa Rica 2-1 in San Jose.

In the third match of the day, Panama and Guatemala played to a goalless draw in Panama City.

The six-nation final round will send three teams directly to the World Cup finals in Germany, while the fourth-placed team will play off with an Asian side for a berth.

The United States, whose preparations for the final round were disrupted by a bitter pay dispute, nonetheless turned in a crisp performance in blazing heat at the Queen's Park Oval cricket ground.

Johnson, who became the first American to score in each of his first four international appearances, found a gaping hole in the Trinidad defense in the 30th minute. Right fullback Steve Cherundolo sent the ball in from the right and Johnson headed it past goalkeeper Shaka Hislop.

After some quick passing from Johnson to Landon Donovan, Lewis connected with a brilliant 23-yarder in the 54th minute. Angus Eve scored for the hosts in the 89th minute.

The win means the United States will go into their next match, against archrivals Mexico in Mexico City on March 27, on equal terms.

In Panama City, neither Panama nor Guatemala were able to find the net. But the draw meant both of the teams vying for a first World Cup berth found themselves in front of more experienced Costa Rica in the standings after the first day's action was over.

# Klinsmann wants Kahn out?

AFP, Berlin

West Germany's 1974 World Cup winner Sepp Maier claims German national coach Jurgen Klinsmann is determined to oust goalkeeper Oliver Kahn from the national team.

Bayern Munich custodian Kahn looked a glum figure on the substitutes' bench as Arsenal's Jens Lehmann stood between the sticks for Germany's 2-2 draw with Argentina on Wednesday.

"Klinsmann wants to bring an end to Kahn but he will not manage it," Maier told the Bild daily. "The way he is treating the elder players is the lowest of the low."

"I would have gone crazy if someone said to me: 'You are playing really well but you are on the bench,'" said Maier.

"Lehmann has been on the bench at Arsenal for the past 12 games, plays once and then he is in the national team."

Kahn was stripped of the captaincy by Klinsmann, who opted for Michael Ballack, but the 35-year-old has refused to come out and publicly criticise the coach.

"Oliver wants to be in goal for the 2006 World Cup and that is why he is keeping quiet," continued Maier. "But deep down Klinsmann must know he cannot win the World Cup without Kahn."

Klinsmann removed Maier as Germany's goalkeeping coach accusing him of being biased towards Kahn.

# Points go to Van Basten

### Football

AP, Birmingham

Sven-Goran Eriksson is coming up to his fourth anniversary with England. Marco van Basten has been in charge of the Dutch team just over six months.

If Wednesday's 0-0 draw is an indication, Van Basten already has achieved in half a year what Eriksson hasn't been able to since he arrived in England.

Although there was little to entertain 40,000 fans at Villa Park, Van Basten went home with the satisfaction that his new-look defense shut out potentially one of the most potent strikeforces around.

Eriksson, by contrast, still doesn't know how to correctly harness the talents of Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen and Shaun Wright-Phillips backed up by David Beckham, Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard.

This time the Swede tried a 4-3-3 formation to accommodate the pace and direct runs of Wright-Phillips as well as Beckham's passing ability. It didn't work.

Beckham, usually a right-sided midfielder, was popping up all over Villa Park - sometimes behind his own defense, on the left wing, or in the center. Gerrard, whose surging runs from deep midfield are his strength, was found wandering on the left wing waiting for the ball.

Rooney was another player who never appeared to be where he wanted to be. When he should have been challenging for the ball in the penalty area, he was on the left trying to create something for co-striker Owen.

"I am always happy with Rooney wherever he plays," Eriksson said after his talented team failed to goal for the second game in a row.

"On the bench I said to the coaches 'He's too deep. He works too hard.' I don't want to see him as a left-back."

When Eriksson sent on Crystal Palace striker Andy Johnson for Rooney, the man who has scored 15 league and cup goals playing the middle, was under instructions to play on the right. He didn't get close enough to take a shot.

Eriksson said he was satisfied with the new formation but didn't commit himself to using it in next month's World Cup qualifying games at home to Northern Ireland and Azerbaijan.

"At least I know we can do it and it worked," he said. "Whether we will do it against Northern Ireland I haven't thought about that yet."

He wasn't concerned that his team hadn't scored in 180 minutes, including a disappointing 1-0 loss to Spain in November.

"This was a much better performance than against Spain," he said. "Normally we score goals and I know we should have scored today but we didn't."

Van Basten, unable to field

injured forwards Ruud van Nistelrooy, Arjen Robben or Pierre van Hoooydonk, was relieved that England's attack didn't overrun his defenders.

"We expected a lot of problems because England has a good and experienced team and we were curious to know how we were going to defend against these outstanding forward and midfield players," he said after his team's seventh game without defeat.

"Lampard and Beckham and Gerrard are capable of passing the ball behind our defensive line and with quick forward players like Owen, Shaun Wright-Phillips and Rooney they are very dangerous."

"But we thought about it and did our homework quite well and they didn't have a lot of chances."

The negative point for Van Basten was that his own strikeforce failed to open up a makeshift England defense which had five regulars missing because of injury. Its only real threat was when Feyenoord striker Dirk Kuyt hit the post from 20 yards (meters). When Van Nistelrooy and Robben return to the side to team up with Bayern Munich's Roy Makaay, Van Basten will have a far more potent strikeforce. He will need it with the Dutch battling three other teams in their qualifying group and just one sure to make it to World Cup 2006 in Germany.

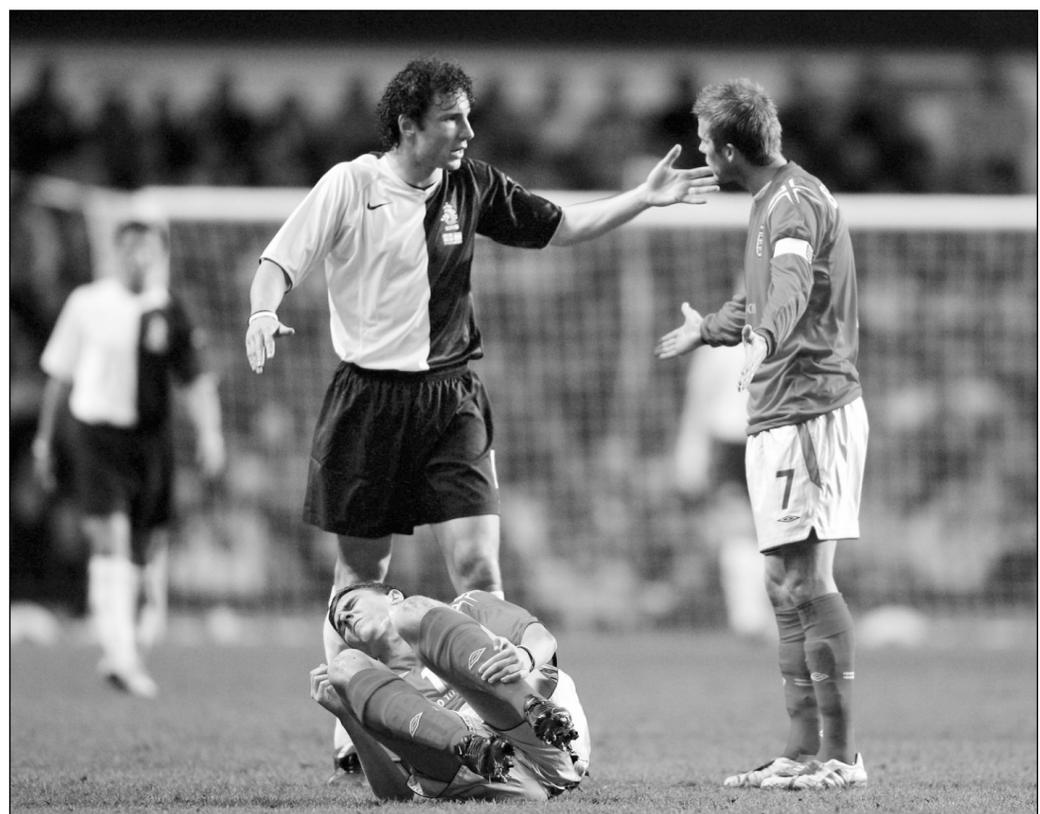


PHOTO: AFP

England's David Beckham (R) argues with Mark van Bommel (L) of the Netherlands after he had tackled Stewart Downing (C) during their international friendly at Villa Park in Birmingham on February 9.