

Clueless England, Zizou-inspired France

Football

AFP, Paris

England's belief that they are serious World Cup contenders suffered a shattering reality check on Wednesday when Denmark sent them crashing to their worst defeat for 25 years.

Fortunately for coach Sven-Goran Eriksson and his bunch of highly-paid but under-performing players, the shambolic 4-1 defeat in Copenhagen was a friendly international two weeks ahead of their next competitive challenge against Wales in a World Cup qualifier.

On a busy night of international friendlies, France celebrated the return of talismanic Zinedine Zidane from retirement with a 3-0 win against Cote d'Ivoire with the former World Footballer of the Year getting on the scoresheet.

Elsewhere, Italy hammered home their credentials as World Cup favourites with a 2-1 win against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin.

World champions Brazil came back from a goal down to draw 1-1 in Croatia while Argentina beat Hungary 2-1.

Bitter rivals Holland and Germany fought out a 2-2 draw in Rotterdam where 22 fans were arrested.

But it was in Copenhagen where the real drama was happening.

Eriksson was angry after seeing his team concede three goals in seven second-half minutes in the friendly clash as England conceded four goals for the first time since they lost to Wales in 1980.

The sides had been locked at 0-0 at half-time but Eriksson made four changes at the break bringing on Michael Owen, goalkeeper David James as well as Jamie Carragher and Glen Johnsen and the Danes took full advantage.

Charlton striker Dennis Rommedahl, former Newcastle and AC Milan hitman Jon Dahl Tomasson, with his 36th international goal, and substitute Michael Gravgaard set Denmark on their way to victory.

Wayne Rooney grabbed a late consolation for England before substitute Soren Larsen added a fourth for the Danes in injury time.

There were no such problems for 1998 World Cup winners France as they enjoyed a 3-0 win over Cote d'Ivoire in Montpellier.

Zidane, lured out of retirement to help France's ailing World Cup campaign, added style and substance to Raymond Domenech's side in the warm up to next month's crucial qualifier against the Republic of Ireland.

With the 33-year-old's every step cheered by a sell-out 30,000 crowd the Real Madrid star, wearing the captain's armband, crowned his comeback with a second half goal which was sandwiched by efforts from William Gallas and Thierry Henry.

The great man himself said it had been vital for France to win after a string of drawn games.

"When you draw a lot of games your confidence goes but the quality of the players is still there.

"Tonight, we refound that confidence. It did us good to score. I scored in my first international, it felt good to repeat that!

Zidane's return to the international fray was down to some fast-talking by the wily Domenech - and a mysterious apparition at his bedside.

And he quickly made his mark 11 years to the day that he first donned a French shirt when in the 19th minute he came up with an angled shot that narrowly edged over the crossbar.

Another veteran Lillian Thuram was also returning but the Juventus defender's comeback lasted barely half an hour when he had to limp off injured to be replaced by Sebastian

Squillaci.

France went in front when Gallas marked his 28th birthday in the best possible way when he scored in the 28th minute in what was first ever goal for his country.

The Chelsea defender's powerful header off a sweetly struck corner from Sylvain Wiltord flew over Cote d'Ivoire keeper Jean-Jacques Tizie giving the Blues due reward for some entertaining play.

Just before the break Zidane produced a neat cross for Willy Sagnol over on the right who knocked it back to 'Zizou' only for his header to be scooped up safely by Tizie.

Then on 61 minutes the stadium erupted when Wiltord sent a corner flying across the goalmouth for Zidane who flicked the ball left-footed into the corner of the Cote d'Ivoire net.

His beaming smile told its own story as he savoured his 27th goal in the national shirt.

Five minutes later Thierry Henry, like Gallas also celebrating his 28th birthday, got in on the act with a fine solo effort when he saw off a lone Cote d'Ivoire defender and Tizie to produce an acute left-angled shot which trickled into an empty goal.

The Netherlands were left to rue a string of missed chances as arch rivals Germany came from two goals down to secure a flattering 2-2 draw in Rotterdam.

Chelsea winger Arjen Robben gave the Dutch a 2-0 lead at the break before captain Michael

Ballack, with his 29th goal in 59 appearances, and substitute Gerald Asamoah levelled the score.

In Budapest, Manchester United defender Gabriel Heinze scored the winner to give ten-man Argentina a 2-1 friendly win against Hungary.

Heinze headed in a corner in the 62nd minute as the South Americans, who have already booked their place in the World Cup finals in Germany next summer, made up for their shortfall in numbers.

Maxi Rodriguez had given them a 19th minute lead before Sandor Torghelle levelled 10 minutes later. Lionel Messi was then red-carded in the 65th minute.

In Dublin, Italy's goalkeeper Flavio Roma and referee Paolo Costa put paid to Ireland's best efforts to salvage their manager Brian Kerr's 17-game unbeaten home record in a high-tempo friendly.

After a thrilling first half which saw Italian guile register a 2-1 lead over Irish graft, the Monaco stopper pulled off a finger-tip save three minutes from time and the Portuguese referee harshly disallowed a Clinton Morrison goal for handball in injury time.

Andrea Pirlo put the Italians ahead in the 10th minute with Alberto Gilardino adding the second after half an hour. Andy Reid pulled one back for Ireland.



PHOTO: AFP

ZI-DONE! French superstar Zinedine Zidane is understandably jubilant after scoring on his return to international football during the match against Ivory Coast at the Mosson Stadium in Montpellier on Wednesday.

No stopping Mexico, USA

AFP, Los Angeles

Jared Borgetti became Mexico's all-time leading scorer on Wednesday as Mexico beat Costa Rica 2-0 in Mexico City on Wednesday to edge ever closer to a 2006 World Cup berth.

Borgetti opened the scoring against an ultra-defensive Costa Rica in the 63rd minute, his 36th goal for Mexico taking him past Carlos Hermosillo and Luis Hernandez on his country's most-prolific list.

Ricardo Osorio's low cross from the right was missed by two Costa Rica defenders and ran through to Borgetti, who rifled the ball into the roof of the net at the far post.

Francisco Fonseca scored the insurance goal in the 85th as Mexico remained unbeaten in the final six-nation qualifying group from North and Central America and the Caribbean (CONCACAF).

Mexico have won five of their six matches so far, with one draw, to head the standings with 16 points as they look toward an anticipated showdown with the United States on September 3 in Columbus, Ohio.

The United States, who beat Trinidad and Tobago 1-0 earlier Wednesday, have 15, as both nations have all but booked their tickets to Germany.

The top three teams in the final qualifying phase automatically advance, while the fourth-placed team will play off with a team from Asia for a berth.

Fleming says, no comment

REUTERS, Bulawayo

Stephen Fleming declined to offer an opinion on Zimbabwe's suitability for the Test arena after his New Zealand team completed their second thrashing of the home side in Bulawayo on Wednesday.

New Zealand won by an innings and 46 runs an hour before the scheduled close on the third day. They won the first Test in Harare by an innings and 294 runs in less than two days.

"It took us so long to win a Test ourselves, and I don't feel qualified to make a statement on their cricket," captain Fleming told a news conference with reference to New Zealand's own long winless period after being admitted to the elite club of Test-playing countries.

"I guess as a cricket community we've got to support them.

"They have had and will have some fine cricketers."

Fleming preferred to talk about his own team's performance.

"These were certainly different circumstances to Harare, we had to work a lot harder," Fleming said with regard to the placid pitch.

"You do question the standard of the opposition but we were still pretty ruthless."

Despite the return of some of their experienced players, Zimbabwe have lost seven of the eight Test matches they have played since April last year.

Former captain Heath Streak warned that the repeated defeats would sap the players' confidence.

"The guys have their pride at stake, and no-one likes to get beaten," Streak told a news conference.

"You can't allow the guys to get too down in the dumps, like they were after the loss in Harare."

Brazil held

Football

AFP, Split, Croatia

Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira said he was satisfied after his world champions were held to a 1-1 draw by Croatia here on Wednesday.

The Croats took the lead in the 32nd minute through Niko Kranjcar, the son of Croatia's manager, with Ricardinho levelling ten minutes later.

"We just got a result against a decent Croatian side," said Parreira.

"This was good preparation for us for our next World Cup qualifier against Chile," added Parreira whose

2002 world Cup winners are

coasting to Germany 2006 needing just three points from their last three qualifiers.

But he expressed concern about two of his star players, Ronaldo and Adriano.

"Ronaldo and Adriano weren't at their normal level. The game against Chile is only in a fortnight and hope that they'll be in better physical condition and more motivated after training for their respective clubs."

The wet weather conspired against any slick moving action, the last time Brazil had encountered such conditions, in the Confederations Cup final against Argentina in Frankfurt in June, the stadium roof had kept them dry.

Brazil made the first move with a

Roberto Carlos freekick going close, then Ronaldo stirred the Croatian keeper into action with a shot in the ninth minute.

Having contained the Brazilians, Croatia fought back with skipper Kranjcar putting them in the lead when Brazil keeper Dida failed to collect a weak back-pass and Kranjcar was on hand to pounce on the opportunity.

But Croatia only held the lead for ten minutes when Ricardinho produced a neat freekick which flew into the back of the hosts' net.

Parreira brought on Real Madrid's new recruit Robinho in the second half but it was his teammate Ronaldo who fluffed a chance in the 57th minute.

Zimbabwe name Curran as coach

AFP, Bulawayo

Bowling supremo Kevin Curran was confirmed Wednesday as coach of the Zimbabwe national cricket team.

He replaces West Indian Phil Simmons with immediate effect after a disastrous year for the team.

Simmons had been coach since last September when he replaced Australian Geoff Marsh.

But he came under intense local criticism in Harare after the first Test defeat by New Zealand last week, a margin of an innings and 294 runs.

That criticism intensified when his team suffered another innings defeat here on Wednesday losing the series 2-0 to the Kiwi tourists.

We must tackle

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swing for more than 10 years, mainly on the subcontinent, but the difference here is they are getting the ball to move the other way."

Flintoff has quickly become England's dangerman with the ball despite a return of just one five-wicket haul in 50 Test appearances while Jones' productivity has also increased sharply; they have 16 and 13 wickets in the series respectively.

"Without the ball reverse swinging you do not feel Jones is supremely quick, he doesn't swing the ball abnormally but when he starts reverse swinging it he is in the ball game," said Langer.

Orange drown

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shot that sent Tarek the wrong way following a deflection.

Zahid then sealed the victory ten minutes from time after a 40-yard dash down the middle. The diminutive midfielder, who exchanged one pass with Ibrahim to slice through the rival defence, tapped the ball into an empty net after going round the goalkeeper.

Abahani looked set to take revenge for their 4-0 loss to the Oranges -- their worst ever defeat to Brothers -- in the season's curtain raising Independence Day Gold Cup football tournament. However, Ibrahim pounced on a right-side centre by Tipu over the bar from handshaking distance while Parvez shot the ball just wide of the open net in the dying minutes.

Yellow cards: Shipon (Abahani) and Liton (Brothers)

TEAMS

ABAHANI: Nizam, Obaidur, Marshall, Shipon, Wali, Ibrahim (Tushar), Joy, Ndem, Ujjal (Parvez), Farhad (Zahid) and Tipu.

BROTHERS UNION: Tarek, Sujan, Jewel, Masud Rana, Sujai, Pranotosh, Abul (Monwar), Puma (Tapu), Parvez Babu, Emily and Victor (Liton).

Referee: Mansoor Azad.

Left dazed

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disaster all over the place, nothing went right and I'm very upset.

"I apologise to the fans. It seemed like it was a holiday in the second half and I have told the players that they can forget about the World Cup if they play like that again."

The sides had been locked at 0-0 at half-time but Eriksson made four changes at the break bringing on Michael Owen, goalkeeper David James as well as Jamie Carragher and Glen Johnsen and the Danes took full advantage as England suffered their heaviest defeat since they conceded four goals to Wales in 1980.

Rommedahl's opening goal will again lead to questions over the future of James as he came sprinting out of his area to leave his team exposed.

Cricket

REUTERS, Centurion

Captain Inzamamul Haq blamed his batsmen for Asia's two-run defeat by Africa in the opening game of the Afro-Asia Cup on Wednesday.

Chasing a modest target of 199 for victory, pre-tournament favourites Asia coasted to 50 without loss before Shaun Pollock claimed three wickets in the 11th over to turn the match on its head.

Inzamam told reporters his batsmen still "needed hard work in the nets over the next two days" to win the three-match series.

"Our bowlers are experienced and I thought they did very well. 199 was not too big a total to chase. The pitch was a bit damp but it was a good wicket," Inzamam said.

"We had a good start when we reached 50 in the first 10 overs but then we lost six wickets in scoring the next 50 runs. That was the turning point of the match."

Africa coach Mickey Arthur, the newly appointed South African mentor, was delighted with the win.

"I hope all the matches aren't so close but it was a fantastic win. It was a great environment to work in."

In a low-scoring match, Asia were bowled out for 196 while, chasing Africa's total of 198.

Africa's Ashwell Prince was the top scorer from either side as he finished unbeaten on 78.

Arthur was particularly pleased with 22-year-old rookie Dale Steyn, who began the 49th over with Asia needing just three runs for victory but he bowled Ashish Nehra to win the match.

"Dale Steyn has been in the cauldron now and the experience will stand him in good stead for the rest of his career," said Arthur.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Barber-shop item

5 "— for All Seasons"

9 Trump casino hotel, briefly

12 Military no-show

13 Ashcroft predecessor

14 — glance

15 Toledo's country

16 "What's — for me?"

17 Cartoonist Chast

18 "Zip — — Doo-Dah"

19 Bottom line

20 Bronx cheer

21 Examine thoroughly

23 Copper head?

25 Hollywood industry

28 Sills

32 St.

33 Blazing

34 Attorney Belli

36 Young hen

37 New Haven collegian

38 Call-day link

39 Shock

42 Gear tooth

44 Brood of pheasants

48 "Caught ya!"

49 Skin opening

50 Apprehend

51 Disen-cumber

52 Additionally

53 Early birds?

54 Sauce source

55 Water-gate prosecutor

56 Misplace

57 Jawsorski

58 Misplace

59 Pie

60 Still

61 Unpaid

62 Oliver's request

63 Brood of pheasants

64 Bobby Vinton hit

65 Usher's label

66 Diner's card

67 Muppet drummer

68 "Just kidding!"

69 Fictional plantation

70 Super-market lineup

71 Buckeyes' home

72 "— of Spain"

73 Roughly

74 Moor's

75 Live

76 quarters

77 Differently

78 Crony

JABFAIRFRED

ORASTASEAR

BANKSHOTHAVE

KITEPALED

OARNSGOER

ACQUEGAMEPLAN

REPULTITALISCO

ESTRAGONAFRO

EMIRORTON

GLAMPAAHAB

AUDIDATATABANK

LADSODORNEO

MUISCOMAKEN

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CRYPTOQUIP

Y M F Q , E P S D F V Y U M F C I

HYO N J O S V Z L A F V S W I Y L I

FO L Z H O W C A F L Q S F E W .

F S ' O Y N Y F U D Z J O W C Z V .

Yesterday's Cryptquip: ON THE SET OF "I LOVE LUCY," ONE COULD SAFELY SAY THAT EVERYBODY INVOLVED HAD A BALL.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: N equals J

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.