

Macedonia hold England

AFP, Manchester



Steve McClaren suffered his first setback as England coach as his underperforming team were held to a 0-0 draw by Macedonia at Old Trafford on Saturday.

McClaren, who saw a Peter Crouch goal seal a 1-0 Group E win against the same opponents in Skopje last month, had recorded three wins from his opening three games after succeeding Sven-Goran Eriksson as head coach during the summer.

But despite a Steven Gerrard effort that hit the crossbar five minutes from time, England simply could not find the breakthrough against an impressive Macedonia team.

"I am disappointed and frus-

trated, and so are the players in the changing room," said McClaren.

"Looking at the performance it has got to be better."

Liverpool midfielder Gerrard will miss Wednesday's tricky trip to Croatia after picking up a first-half booking -- his second of the campaign.

He said: "It's a big blow for us to lose Stevie. With Steven missing, we are now going to have look at the situation and reflect on what we are going to do tactically."

Macedonia coach Srecko Katanec admitted that he expected more from McClaren's team.

He said: "I expected England to play a more aggressive game and put us under more pressure."

"But I am very satisfied with the performance of my players because they played well tactically and earned a very good point."

McClaren was dealt a blow before the game had even started

with Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand ruled out due to a back strain suffered in training 24 hours earlier.

Ferdinand's injury opened the door for Spurs captain Ledley King to partner John Terry at the heart of the England defence, but the pair were forced to endure a nervous first-half as Macedonia created the better opportunities and appeared to be a more potent attacking force than the home side.

The absence of broken leg victim Owen Hargreaves, a key figure in the midfield holding role for England in recent months, was perhaps another reason for Macedonia's free-flowing first-half football.

There was simply nobody to plug the gaps for England and break up the play and an uncharacteristic mistake by Gerrard led to a dangerous opportunity for Katanec's team in the 11th minute.

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SPECTACULAR, YET NOT EFFECTIVE: England forward Wayne Rooney (R) controls the ball during the Euro 2008 qualifying Group E match against Macedonia at Old Trafford on Saturday. A nondescript Macedonia held England to a goalless draw.

EURO 2008 QUALIFYING RESULTS

GROUP A
Kazakhstan 0 Poland 1 (Smolarek 52)
Armenia 0 Finland 0
Serbia 1 (Zigic 54) Belgium 0
Portugal 3 (Ronaldo 25, 63, Carvalho 31) Azerbaijan 0
GROUP B
Faroe Islands 0 Lithuania 1 (A Skerla 89)
Scotland 1 (Caldwell 67) France 0
Italy 2 (Oddo 70-pen, Toni 79) Ukraine 0
GROUP C
Moldova 2 (Rogaciov 13, 32-pen) Bosnia-Herzegovina 2 (Misimovic 62, Grlc 68)
Hungary 0 Turkey 1 (Tuncay 40)
Greece 1 (Katsouranis 33) Norway 0
GROUP D
Wales 1 (Bale 39) Slovakia 5 (Svento 14, Mintal 32, 38, Karhan 51, Vittek 59)
Czech Republic 7 (Kulic 15, Polak 22, Baros 28, 68, Koller 43, 52, Jarolim 49) San Marino 0
Cyprus 5 (Konstantinou 10, 50-pen, Garpozis 16, Charalambides 60, 75) Republic of Ireland 2 (Ireland 8, Dunne 43)
GROUP E
Russia 1 (Arshavin 5) Israel 1 (Ben Shushan 83)
England 0 Macedonia 0
Croatia 7 (Petric 14, 39, 48, 50, Klasnic 58, Balaban 62, Modric 83) Andorra 0
GROUP F
Latvia 4 (Karlsons 14, Verpakovskis 15, 25, Visnakovs 52) Iceland 0
Sweden 2 (Elmander 10, Allback 82) Spain 0
Denmark 0 Northern Ireland 0
GROUP G
Romania 3 (Mutu 8, Marica 10, Goian 76) Belarus 1 (Kornilenko 20)
Bulgaria 1 (Petrov 14) Netherlands 1 (Van Persie 61)
Slovenia 2 (Novakovic 30, Koren 44) Luxembourg 0

Materazzi writes Zidane book

INTERNET, undated

Marco Materazzi has written a book titled "What I really said to Zidane" and all the proceeds will go to charity.

The World Cup Final incident, in which Zinedine Zidane head-butted Materazzi, has become an historic moment in popular culture.

It spawned video spoofs, jokes and a hit single in France, although debate rages on about what exactly Materazzi said to 'provoke' the attack. FIFA considered it enough to warrant a two-match ban, just one less than Zidane's three.

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HIGHLANDERS ON A HIGH: Scotland players are over the moon after their stunning 1-0 win over France during their 2008 Euro qualifying match at Hampden Park in Glasgow on Saturday.

Bravehearts stun France

AFP, Glasgow



Scotland stunned France with a 1-0 victory over the World Cup finalists at Hampden on Saturday to go

clear at the top of Euro 2008 qualifying group B.

Despite the French dominating the match from start to finish, Celtic defender Gary Caldwell's 67th minute goal was all that separated the teams at the end.

As expected France had controlled possession from the kick-off and Thierry Henry twice won free-kicks in dangerous positions within the first 10 minutes, which he took himself.

The Arsenal striker's first in the eighth minute, following a foul by Caldwell, was placed towards the top right-hand corner, out of the reach of Scotland goalkeeper Craig Gordon, but rebounded off the post.

A minute later, after a foul on him

by David Weir 25-yards from goal, Henry's shot required Gordon to save under his crossbar.

France had the ball in the net in the 17th minute when Patrick Viera headed Franck Ribery's free-kick from the left past Gordon but the assistant referee had already flagged for offside.

Scotland were merely hanging on as the World Cup finalists stretched them over all the pitch.

Florent Malouda almost opened the scoring in the 32nd minute with a low drive from 20-yards which Gordon threw himself to his left to fingertip away.

The home side finally had an effort on goal in the 37th minute when Caldwell met Paul Hartley's corner with a downward header which French keeper Gregory Coupet saved low to his right.

Thanks to some inspired and desperate defending by Scotland the score remained goalless at half-time much to the delight of the home support.

Though Scotland had been

completely out played in the first-half they could have taken the lead in the 49th minute.

Darren Fletcher played a lovely through ball with the outside of his right boot and James McFadden stole in behind Jean-Alain Bounsang only to slice his shot wide from a tight angle.

France were continuing to dominate, however, and Scotland were content to launch high balls forward out of defence towards lone striker McFadden.

But amazingly, entirely against the run of play, Scotland took the lead in the 67th minute.

Hartley had won a corner for himself on the right and the Hearts midfielder then flighted the ball in towards the back post where Caldwell slid in to poke home from six-yards.

The French were rattled by the goal and they almost found themselves two behind a minute later when Hartley's back-heel released Gary Teale but his side-footed effort was too close to Coupet who saved

easily.

Scotland could have snatched another goal in the 78th minute when captain Barry Ferguson put Hartley through on goal but the Hearts player miscontrolled and the chance was lost.

Inevitably France again began to gain the upperhand and they forced a series of corner kicks without ever being able to test Gordon.

In the 86th minute Henry squandered a fantastic opportunity to level the score when Malouda's cross found him unmarked in the penalty area but he headed tamely into the hands of Gordon.

France threw everything at the Scots in the closing minutes but they struggled to break through the heroic home defence and even when they did they found Gordon in brilliant form.

Scotland now lead France by three points in Group B and have ensured the rest, including world champions Italy, have it all to do to qualify for the finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Azzurri back on track

AFP, Rome



Italy boosted their chances of qualifying for the 2008 European championships with a hard-fought 2-0 win against Ukraine.

The pressure was on the world champions after taking just one point from their first two Group B matches against Lithuania and France.

But they rose to the challenge with a precious victory over the stubborn Ukrainians who held out until the 70th minute at the Olympic stadium.

Massimo Oddo broke the deadlock from the penalty spot after Andrei Rusol had pulled back Luca Toni in the box.

And Toni netted himself in the 79th minute with a rising drive after

being put through by substitute Antonio Di Natale.

Italy's win was far from easy though, and they were indebted to their keeper Gianluigi Buffon for a string of fine saves.

Victory for the Italians against the team they defeated in the World Cup quarterfinals tasted even sweeter following France's shock 1-0 defeat away to Scotland.

It was also Italy's first win under Roberto Donadoni since he replaced Marcello Lippi shortly after the World Cup.

Italy's victory left them on four points, five adrift of leaders Scotland and two behind World Cup final opponents France.

Marco Materazzi returned for Italy after completing a two-match suspension following his spat with Zinedine Zidane in the World Cup final, while Vincenzo Iaquinta was a surprise choice in a three-man attack alongside Alessandro Del

Piero and Toni.

The most notable absentee for Ukraine was their star striker Andrei Shevchenko. The Chelsea forward, who spent seven years in Italy with AC Milan, was struck by a virus.

Despite his absence, Ukraine started brightly with Anatoly Timoshchuk testing Buffon with a low drive 20 yards in the fourth minute.

Buffon was made to work harder two minutes later as Ukraine nearly snatched an early lead.

Andrei Vorobei crossed from the left to the back post and Oleg Gusev escaped his marker to fire an angled shot towards goal, which the Italy keeper palmed away.

Del Piero sent a half volley over the bar after linking up cleverly with Andrea Pirlo, before Toni came within inches of putting Italy ahead.

Oddo crossed from the right flank for the lanky Fiorentina marksman whose flicked header was

fingertipped away by Alexander Shovkovsky.

Toni's dipping volley sailed narrowly over the bar as Italy ended the half on top.

A last ditch tackle by Sergei Nazarenko saved Ukraine when Iaquinta lined up a shot on goal shortly after the restart, before Timoshchuk stung Buffon's palms with a fierce drive.

Shovkovsky then denied Iaquinta with a one-handed reflex save, while at the other end Buffon did well to keep out substitute Maxi Kalinichenko's curling free-kick.

Italy finally made the breakthrough 20 minutes from time when Rusol tugged Toni's shirt as he reached for a cross and Oddo coolly converted the resulting penalty.

Toni's emphatic finish nine minutes later ensured no way back for Ukraine and put Italy's qualifying campaign back on track after a worrying start.



BACK WITH A BANG: Italy's gigantic forward Luca Toni (L) unleashes a thunderous volley to score the second goal against Ukraine during their Euro 2008 qualifying match at Rome's Olympic Stadium on Saturday.

Turkey keep perfect record

REUTERS, Budapest

A well-crafted goal by Sanli Tuncay earned Turkey their second straight victory in Euro 2008 qualifying Group C, 1-0 over Hungary on Saturday.

The visitors took the lead in the 40th minute when Cetin Servet headed the ball into the path of Tuncay and the Fenerbahce midfielder beat Gabor Kiraly with a brilliant lob from close range.

Hungary had the only other real scoring opportunity of the first half, in the 15th minute, but after fine work from West Bromwich Albion striker Zoltan Gera on the right, Pal Dardai blasted his shot over the bar from 14 metres.

The home team nearly equalised 10 minutes into the second half but Gera's curling free-kick hit the crossbar.

"We did not play well, but got the result we came for, that's what matters at the moment," Turkey coach Fatih Terim said. "The team is under enormous pressure, so regarding that, I have to be satisfied."

Hungary coach Peter Bozsik could not hide his disappointment. "I feel we only played around half of what we are capable of," he said.

"Two home defeats do not help our qualifying chances but there is still a long way to go."

Hungary, who were also beaten 4-1 by Norway, must beat Malta on Wednesday to revive their hopes in the group.

Basten happy despite draw

AFP, Sofia

Marco van Basten saw his side grab a 1-1 draw with Bulgaria on Saturday as his Dutch side remained top of Euro 2008 Group G at the end of a week the former striking star would prefer to forget.

Having spent the build-up to the match fending off questions over the refusal of Mark van Bommel and Ruud van Nistelrooy to play for him, van Basten's evening got off to the worst possible start.

Martin Petrov gave Hristo Stoichkov's side a 12th-minute lead to register his fourth goal in three qualifying matches.

But Arsenal star Robin van Persie levelled just after the hour mark.

Van Basten also saw Liverpool star Dirk Kuyt forced off through injury before van Persie struck.



Spanish Formula 1 driver Fernando Alonso of Renault holds the trophy after winning the Japanese Grand Prix at Suzuka on Saturday.

FORMULA 1

Alonso tightens title-grip as Schumi goes up in smoke

AFP, Suzuka

Defending drivers world champion Fernando Alonso celebrated like a man possessed on Sunday after he moved within a point of retaining his title by winning the Japanese Grand Prix.

But on a day of joy for the Renault driver, who took full advantage when Michael Schumacher's Ferrari suffered an engine failure, there was sadness for his teammate Italian Giancarlo Fisichella.

Fisichella, who finished third behind second-placed Brazilian Felipe Massa in the second Ferrari, could not avoid weeping on the victors' rostrum, following the death on Thursday of his best friend.

This, he said, as he dedicated his race result to him, had reminded him of the precious value of life -- a

worthy comment on a day when Schumacher's dream of an unprecedented eighth title was virtually ended and put into perspective.

Alonso, who had performed a bizarre victory jig and danced a pirouette after the race, refused to admit he had one hand on his second drivers' crown.

"Anything can happen, the same in Brazil, who knows -- we have to go there and play safe and we have to finish the race," said the Spaniard.

The 25-year-old Renault driver trailed the German for 36 laps of the 53-laps contest before taking the lead when the retirement-bound seven-times champion Schumacher was forced to retire with an engine failure for the first time this year.

Alonso went on to cruise to an unexpected victory and now

requires just one point in the final race of the season, in Brazil in a fortnight, to clinch his second championship.

It was his first victory in eight races since the Canadian Grand Prix in June, his seventh win this year and the 15th of his career.

"It was fun for me early on when I passed Ralf (Schumacher)," said Alonso.

"The car performance later, after the first pit stop, was really good and then after Michael's problem the race was very good for us."

"When the gap behind Michael was only around 5.8 or 5.9 or six seconds, I thought it was possible to win the race. Why not? I thought."

"Then it was completely a surprise when I saw what happened to Michael. Ferrari don't have many

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