



Germany captain Michael Ballack (R) falls under the challenge of Cyprus midfielder Konstantinos Markidis (C) during their Euro 2008 qualifier at Nicosia on Wednesday.

Cypriots sting Germans

AFP, Paris

European minnows Cyprus gave another rousing performance here on Wednesday by holding footballing superpower Germany to a famous 1-1 draw in this Euro 2008 Group D qualifier.

Germany, who knocked 13 past San Marino, found Cyprus a tougher proposition despite missing a hat-full of chances in the second half and German coach Joachim Low could not hide his dismay at dropping two valuable points against the rank outsiders.

"It's obvious we are not pleased with the result. This was a tough and at times physical games," Low told reporter afterwards.

"We were mentally and physically tired...but we won't ponder too much on why we failed here, this is only one negative result in a successful year," he added.

However, he did concede that it was a "fair result" and warned the other teams in the group it will be "difficult playing in Nicosia".

His opposite number Angelos Anastasiadis was the happier of the two coaches after securing a result that will look good on his CV.

"It's a satisfactory result considering who we were playing, they are a bigger and better team and three times world champions," said Cyprus' Greek coach.

"We were equal to the Germans for 70 minutes but we began to tire towards the end but they could only threaten us with crosses," he added.

This was a less than a dominant performance from the leading scorers of the group but Germany now head the standings on goal average.

Following the 5-2 thumping of Ireland in their previous home game, Cyprus were gunning for greater glory against the mighty Germany.

Loew was forced to make three key changes with Arsenal's goalkeeper Jens Lehmann pulling out with a heavy cold, Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski still injured, and Bayer Leverkusen's Bernd Schneider missing with a muscle strain.

The depleted German side started cautiously as they sized up their plucky opponents in what proved to be a difficult fixture.

The Cypriots took the game to the visitors from the kick-off and looked to get their pacy forwards behind the opposing defence. And it was a surprise when Germany took the lead on 15 minutes after a well-worked free-kick.

Torsten Frings touched the ball to captain Michael Ballack who fired a 25-yard screamer into the bottom right hand corner of the net, leaving the keeper clutching at air.

It was Germany's first shot on target with the Chelsea star carving out more opportunities in the game but failed to repeat his goal touch.

The Cypriots kept pushing forward and never lost confidence, and those expecting Germany to cruise to a comfortable victory were proved wrong.

Cyprus's endeavour was rewarded with a goal close to half time when Yiannakis Okkas hit a first-time volley on the edge of the area that flew past keeper Timo Hilderbrand. The cross was supplied by Larisa's Efsthios Alonettis whose pace on the left wing proved a handful all night.

After the interval Chelsea's midfield maestro – the best player in a German shirt – urged his team forward in search of victory.

Ballack's best chance saw a header flash wide of the post from six yards on 55 minutes. Three minutes later the disappointing Miroslav Klose scuffed a shot when he was found unmarked inside the box.

The Cypriots survived a few more close encounters, especially a Bastian Schweinsteiger volley that was cleared off the line by Lambros Lambrou. He almost stole the show at the death but his shot from close range went the wrong side of the upright on 89 minutes.

But the goal mouth action was not confined to one end only, with Cyprus also pushing for an unlikely winner and Alonettis almost lobbed the keeper from the edge of the area just after the hour mark.

The Cypriots – ranked 80 in the world – viewed the game as the ultimate test to gauge how far Cyprus can compete with the very best. They passed that test with

SEE PAGE 22 COL 5

Dutch deny England

AFP, Amsterdam

Rafael van der Vaart's late equaliser denied England a morale-boosting friendly victory over Holland here on Wednesday.

Steve McClaren's side appeared to have done enough to earn England's first win over their hosts on Dutch soil since 1969 after Wayne Rooney had given them a first-half lead in a match they controlled for long periods.

But an encouraging evening ended in frustration after their back four failed to deal with a long throw from the left with five minutes left.

Two flick-ons carried the ball to the feet of van der Vaart near the back post and the Hamburg midfielder fired past Paul Robinson from eight yards.

England still might have won the match through Steven Gerrard's last-minute shot, which was well-saved by substitute goalkeeper, Maarten Stekelenburg, and Holland could have had few complaints given how rarely they threatened for much of the match.

McClaren's decision to make Micah Richards the youngest defender to represent England was vindicated by the end of the evening.

But the 18-year-old Manchester City right-back had a rude introduction to international football, slithering on to his backside as Arjen Robben wriggled past him on the left hand side of the box to generate Holland's only real opportunity prior to van der Vaart's equaliser.

The Chelsea winger's shot was struck from an acute angle but with such ferocity that Robinson was unable to control the direction of his block.

The ball spun dangerously across the goalmouth but the Wigan midfielder Denny Landzaat was unable to direct his follow-up header on target.

Two minutes later Gerrard had an even better chance to put England ahead, when Khalid Boulahrouz's under-hit backpass presented him with a clear run at goal.

The Liverpool midfielder opted for a first-time shot with his left foot when an extra touch might have improved the odds on him scoring. But Henk Timmer, standing in for Edwin van der Sar in the Dutch goal, was a shade fortunate that the ball bounced off the inside of his boot and away for a corner.

As ever, Holland's approach work was easy on the eye. But, having survived that early Robben-inspired scare, England's defence was able to keep their hosts at bay with a degree of comfort; a couple of long-range strikes from Clarence Seedorf and van der Vaart the best they could muster before the interval.

England's cutting edge looked sharper with Joe Cole at the centre of most of their good work.

After coming close to playing first Johnson and then Lampard into scoring positions, the Chelsea midfielder sent in a cross from the left that spun off the head of a Dutch defender to an unmarked Rooney, whose header from the penalty spot had neither the power or direction to overly trouble Timmer.

The Feyenoord goalkeeper then had to charge off his line and improvise a clearance with his knees after Rooney had headed Gerrard's chip into the box for Lampard to chase.

England's pressure finally paid off in the 38th minute when Cole, having switched flanks, found space on the right of the Dutch box and whipped a cross into the six-yard box.

With Timmer hesitating, Rooney was able to get across Andre Ooijer and claim his 12th international goal by prodding a volley past the goalkeeper with the outside of his right boot.

Robinson was called into action just after the start of the second half and did well to catch van der Vaart's swerving left-foot drive. A miscued clearance from Michael Carrick

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1



England star Wayne Rooney (C) is airborne as he shrugs off the attention of Netherlands defender Andre Ooijer (R) to nudge the ball in to score a goal during their friendly match in Amsterdam on Wednesday.

Henry threatens Platini record

AFP, Paris

Thierry Henry closed to within two of Michel Platini's French scoring record with the only goal of a 1-0 win over European champions Greece here on Wednesday.

Henry rose in the 26th minute to score with a rare header after Bayern Munich right-back Willy Sagnol's cross took a triple deflection that beat Greece's backpeddling defence to land invitingly on Henry's head.

It was the dynamic Arsenal forward's 39th goal in 91 games for his country and capped a man-of-the-match display.

Two milestones cannot be far around the corner as Henry homes in on 100 caps and former France and Juventus legend Platini's record of 41 goals for Les Bleus.

Henry, though, was not willing to make too much of a meal of his personal achievements when asked about Platini's record. "This gives me a lot of pleasure but there's still two more (goals needed to equal the record)," he said.

"As I have said many times, Platini did it much quicker than me (in just 72 caps) and just to be compared to that type of player is already amazing."

Scolari hits out at Queiroz

INTERNET, undated

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari thinks Manchester United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz wants his job.

The Portugal boss saw his side defeat Kazakhstan 3-0 on Wednesday with Cristiano Ronaldo amongst the scorers.

United did not want Ronaldo to play due to concerns over his fitness and Queiroz's presence at the game upset Scolari.

"It is all a question of image," said the Portugal boss. "So he can have something to say to his club."

"He came to see the game and to work his candidacy for the Portuguese job in the future and he is well received by us."

"We always open our doors to people."

"He says this in public (that Ronaldo was not fit) but, for us, he says that he is well and he can play."

Sir Alex Ferguson wanted his impressive winger to sit out the Euro 2008 qualifier.

Gullit explains Nistelrooy snub

INTERNET, undated

Ruud Gullit believes Steven Gerrard would be a better player if he joined Chelsea and also explained why Real striker Ruud Nistelrooy would probably never play for the Dutch again.

The England and Liverpool midfielder has been deployed mainly on the right by boss Rafael Benitez and Gullit, speaking after England's 1-1 draw with Holland told talkSPORT. "It is a pity for a player with his standards that he has to play on the outside. It's difficult. If he played at Chelsea with Makelele and Essien doing the [defensive] work for him, he could do all the attacking stuff. I think he would do much better."

When asked if he thought

SEE PAGE 22 COL 5

Basten satisfied with Seedorf

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Netherlands coach Marco van Basten was satisfied with Clarence Seedorf's return to the side after a late equaliser from Rafael van der Vaart earned them a 1-1 draw at home to England in a friendly on Wednesday.

The visitors opened the scoring eight minutes before the interval through Wayne Rooney but Van der Vaart, who started on the right wing in the absence of Robin van Persie, netted from close range with four minutes remaining.

AC Milan midfielder Seedorf made his first appearance under Van Basten and played his first match for the Dutch team since the semi-final of Euro 2004.

Van Basten said Seedorf, who won his 78th cap, is one of three candidates to pick up the baton of midfield enforcer from Phillip Cocu, who retired after the World Cup.

"We didn't expect him to take this team by the hand though he just tried to add his contribution. Some things he did well and sometimes not but that is football," Van Basten told reporters.

Clarence (Seedorf) is a player who can play as well on the left as the right side of the midfield. Van der Vaart and (Wesley) Sneijder have also played good matches in that position but it still is the position Phillip Cocu played for years

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1

Brazil's Swiss cruise

Football

REUTERS, Basel

Brazil stretched their unbeaten run under new coach Dunga to five matches on Wednesday following a hard-fought 2-1 friendly win over Switzerland.

The five-time World Cup winners appeared on course for a comfortable victory following first half goals from central defender Luisao and team captain Kaka.

But an own goal from Maicon, under pressure from Alex Frei, brought Switzerland back into contention with 20 minutes remaining.

The home side then had two good chances to equalise with debutant Brazil goalkeeper Helton tipping a Tranquillo Barnetta strike over the crossbar and Philippe Senderos heading wide from a Hakan Yakin free kick but the visitors held on to make it four wins and a draw under the guidance of Dunga.

"It was a good game and it was natural that the home side would come back stronger in the second

half after we dominated the first," said the Brazil coach afterwards.

"We have a lot of players who still haven't played that much together," Dunga added after fielding a starting line-up with nine changes from the side that lost to France in July's World Cup quarterfinals.

"There is still lots to improve on but it will come."

Switzerland were the only team to exit the World Cup without conceding a goal and their defence looked solid once again in the opening stages of Wednesday's match.

Two uncharacteristic errors allowed Brazil to take control however with Luisao first heading home an Elano corner in the 22nd minute after comfortably breaking free of his markers.

Kaka then slid the ball into an empty net ten minutes before the break after benefiting from a poor back-pass by Swiss striker Johan Vonlanthen.

Goalkeeper Pascal Zuberbuehler got to the ball first after racing off his line but could only crash it into the Brazilian's path following an unfortunate deflection off defender Johan Djourou.

The introduction of Ronaldinho in the 62nd minute looked set to complete Switzerland's misery, particularly when the Barcelona playmaker put Kaka through once again within a minute of his substitution.

This time the captain could only hit the post though and it was Brazil who found themselves on the back foot in the final minutes after Maicon's header into his own net.

"In the last half hour we can say that we could have, should have or would have been able to get a more positive result but the reality is that we lost," Switzerland coach Koebi Kuhn reflected.

"Against a great team like Brazil it's not so tragic of course, but we would certainly have liked to have ended the year in better fashion."

"We played too nervously at the start and didn't find our rhythm until that last half hour, but we have a lot of players who have not been playing regular football at their clubs and I think this kind of match was important to show them what it takes to be successful at international level."



The Brazil team congregate in celebration upon scoring their second goal in their friendly international against Switzerland at the St. Jakob stadium in Basle on Wednesday.

McClaren unbothered by flak

Football

INTERNET, undated

McClaren has been dodging the flak ever since the disastrous Euro 2008 qualifying defeat in Croatia last month but he emerged from his bunker in Amsterdam last night to see his side start to rebuild their battered reputation with a 1-1 draw against Holland.

The result should have been even better for McClaren's men but, after they had failed to find a deserved second after Wayne Rooney had put them in front, England were eventually pegged back four minutes from time by Rafael van der Vaart.

Yet there was enough in a much-improved performance to take the heat off McClaren until England's next outing against Spain at Old Trafford on February 7, although the former Middlesbrough boss claims he has not been affected by the negative comments anyway.

"I am not bothered about the criticism, all I am bothered about is the team, the performance and the result," he said.

"What other people say about me is not a concern. My only concern is this job, ensuring England perform like they did last night and win football matches."

Even though England were ultimately unable to record their first win in the Dutch capital since 1969, there were many plus points to take out of the game.

Pressed further upfield than usual on his first appearance under McClaren, Joe Cole was at the heart of all England's most inventive moves.

Rooney's goal broke an international drought stretching back 12 months, while 18-year-old Micah Richards enjoyed an encouraging debut after becoming the seventh youngest player to appear for England at senior level.

"Micah has come into the squad and not been fazed," revealed McClaren.

"It seems like he has been with us for years and I had no qualms about picking him."

"When you play Holland, you have to defend well in one-on-one situations. He did that, as he has always done for his club. He handled Arjen Robben and Rafael van der Vaart very well."

The one area of concern for McClaren was the way his defence failed to deal with Robben's long throw in the build up

to Van der Vaart's equaliser, allowing Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink to flick it in the far post where his young team-mate was waiting to fire home.

"That is the one disappointment from the night," he admitted.

"Obviously, we don't like conceding goals and we have to find reasons for that."

McClaren should certainly have left Holland in a far more contented mood than when he arrived.

He remains upbeat about England's chances of reaching Euro 2008 even though away wins for Croatia and Russia earlier in the evening nudged his side out of the two qualifying berths.

"We are three points behind Croatia but we still have to play them at home, while Russia are one point ahead and we have to play them twice," observed McClaren, whose side's next qualifier is in Israel on March 24.

"I don't think this group will start until there are three or four games to go and I believe it will go down to the wire."

"I never thought it would be a breeze for anyone. Whoever thought that was silly. But it is up to us and I still say we are in a very good position."