



Players of Sparta Prague toss in the air their head coach Michal Bilek as they celebrate the victory in the Czech League at the Toyota Arena in Prague on Monday. Sparta won the Czech double as the first Czech team since the Czechoslovakia split into independent countries in 1992.

Vogts slams Nigerian football

AFP, Nairobi

Nigerian coach Berti Vogts on Tuesday slammed the country's football board for the national team's poor training ahead of this weekend's 2008 African Nations Cup Group 3 qualifier in Uganda.

He said the Nigerian Football Association's poor leadership was to blame for the failure of some European-based professionals to join the team's training camp in Kenya.

"I am not happy that we have only one training session," said Vogts in reference to Nigeria's 1-0 win over Kenya in their only build-up match on Sunday.

"The boys have been idle for the past three weeks since they finished playing for their respective clubs."

The former German and Scotland coach is upset with the continued absence of Newcastle United star striker Obafemi Martins despite having been released by the English Premiership club at the end of the season.

"Martins says he has a thigh injury and has had to seek treatment in Rome. I don't know the extent of his injury but I have enough strikers to field in Uganda," said Vogts.

Derby back in top flight

Football

AFP, London

Stephen Pearson fired Derby into the Premiership as his second half goal clinched a 1-0 win over West Bromwich Albion in the Championship play-off final on Monday.

Pearson picked the perfect time to score his first goal for Derby as Billy Davies's side returned to English football's top-flight after a five-year absence.

Derby had narrowly missed out on automatic promotion after a late season collapse but they made amends at Wembley by winning the single most lucrative match in world football.

Davies hit the jackpot when he signed Pearson from Celtic in January. The Scotland winger cost only 750,000 pounds, but his close range finish will earn the Rams an estimated 50 million pounds from the increased revenue that comes from being a Premiership club.

The triumph was especially sweet for Davies, who finally got to savour success in the play-offs after losing with Preston in the previous two seasons. It was third time lucky for the Scot, who has underlined his reputation as one of the game's brightest young managers by leading Derby to promotion in his first season at Pride Park.

Davies sprang a surprise by

handing Paul Peschisolido just his fifth start of the season alongside Steve Howard in Derby's forward line.

West Bromwich manager Tony Mowbray had brought his players down to Wembley last week so they could get a feel for the stadium and they instantly looked at home.

With less than a minute gone Diomansy Kamara surged past two Derby defenders into the penalty area before firing in a drive that Stephen Bywater saved low to his left.

Peschisolido's lack of match practice was exposed after 10 minutes when Howard poked a pass through that gave the Canadian a glorious opening, but he could only scuff a weak shot straight at Dean Kiely.

Graham Poll, taking charge of his last match in England before retiring, turned down Albion's penalty appeal when Tyrone Mears lunged in on Jason Koumas and television replays suggested the referee's decision was spot on.

Matt Oakley snatched at a half-chance when Craig Fagan's chest-down fell to the Derby captain, but with so much at stake it was inevitable that serious opportunities were at a premium.

Albion had the best of the few openings with Bywater alertly tipping over a deflected free-kick that would have dropped in under his crossbar.

Kevin Phillips had been kept quiet for much of the first half, but West

Bromwich's former England striker nearly broke the deadlock two minutes before the interval.

Kamara and Zoltan Gera exchanged passes to carve open the Derby defence and Phillips' shot from the edge of the area grazed the crossbar.

Kiely kept Albion on level terms with a superb save on the hour. Oakley met Fagan's cross with a half-volley that was destined for the top corner until the former Charlton stopper acrobatically pushed it over.

It was only a temporary reprieve for Albion. Davies replaced Peschisolido with talented young midfielder Giles Barnes and his decision paid off in the 62nd minute.

Howard's pass sent Barnes away down the right flank and the teenager drove a low cross into the six-yard box, where Pearson got in front of Paul McShane before steering his shot past Kiely.

With their promotion dream in danger of disappearing, Albion pushed forward and Kamara should have done better than shoot well wide from close range.

Gera tested Bywater with a powerful strike and Kamara shot over as Mowbray's side desperately searched for an equaliser.

But Derby held on and Davies's jubilant side can look forward to testing themselves against Manchester United, Chelsea and the rest of the Premiership next season.

A tale of two deputies

Football

AFP, Berlin

While England's Steve McClaren and Germany's Joachim Loew had a similar journey to become national coach of their countries, they have trod different paths of success on the road to Euro 2008.

The similarities in their rise are numerous -- both McClaren and Loew were promoted from assistant coach after the 2006 World Cup finals.

They were low-key replacements for the high-profile pair of England boss Sven-Goran Eriksson and German legend Juergen Klinsmann.

Both appointments received lukewarm responses in their countries' media and the two men were booed off the pitch by their home fans on the same March night, but for very different reasons.

Both men enjoyed success in their opening games, but Low caught the German football public's imagination with a 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in Prague in March, while McClaren's England have gone from bad to worse.

England's fans turned on their manager at Barcelona's Olimpico de Montjuic after they struggled to beat minnows Andorra.

McClaren, 45, came to the job

in the summer of 2006 having built up his reputation as England's assistant coach, first under Peter Taylor and then Eriksson.

He led English club Middlesbrough to the UEFA Cup final in 2006.

But after three convincing wins and a draw in his first four games, things started to unravel on a horror night in Zagreb last October when England lost their Euro 2008 qualifier against Croatia 2-0.

The downward spiral continued in their goalless draw away to Israel and then hit rock bottom in the 3-0 win over Andorra.

On the same night, Low was also enduring mocking whistles from disgruntled German fans when his experimental and inexperienced side lost 1-0 to a late goal against Denmark in Duisburg.

But while McClaren's jeers were borne of sheer frustration at an inept performance, the whistles Low endured were because the fans had come to expect a level of performance that the second-team, complete with six new caps, simply could not produce.

"This young side have learned from the experience, I heard the whistles at the end and I must honestly say I can't understand why, we threw everything at the Danish and there was really no reason to whistle," said Low.

Low became Klinsmann's assistant when the World Cup winning striker was appointed head coach in August 2004, and the 47-year-old came into the national set-up having had only mediocre success at Austrian and German clubs.

The pair brought a new attacking philosophy to the German side with Low's tactical awareness crucial.

They formed a formidable team, reaching the semi-finals of the 2005 Confederations Cup before a young German side punched above its weight to reach the semifinals of the World Cup on home soil, losing to eventual winners Italy.

After Klinsmann decided not to renew his contract in July 2006, Low took over and said his aim was to win the 2008 European Championships.

But the defeat to Denmark was his first defeat in eight games, a run which earned praise from Franz Beckenbauer -- a World Cup winner with Germany as both player and coach.

"I dare to state it," said Beckenbauer. "But at the moment we are the number one team in Europe."

"Low has got the team playing like an instructional video and the momentum Klinsmann built has been carried into the current well-drilled side."

Praise indeed and 1990 World

Cup winning captain Lothar Matthaus went as far as to say, in his column in Sports Bild magazine, that Low was a better coach than Klinsmann.

"Low is a good, switched-on coach and in comparison to Juergen Klinsmann he is a genuine coach," wrote Matthaus.

"Jurgen had absolutely no experience in this job, but what he did have, which was important, was vision, but Low is the better coach."

In contrast, after the poor performance against Andorra, Britain's media put the boot into McClaren, who was given the dreaded vote of confidence by his Football Association bosses.

As if that was bad enough, he has just five games left to improve England's lowly fourth spot in Group E to secure qualification for Euro 2008 in Austria and Switzerland.

With minnows Estonia their opponents in next week, McClaren, who has recalled former skipper David Beckham, can ill afford another slip up.

In contrast, Germany are unbeaten at the top of Group D, level on points with the Czech Republic, but with a game in hand and face San Marino and Slovakia who they have already beaten 13-0 and 4-1 respectively away from home.

What McClaren wouldn't give for statistics like that.

Ranieri ponders next step

INTERNET, undated

Claudio Ranieri will decide by the end of this week on whether he will stay at Parma or return to the Premiership.

The tactician guided the Ducali to Serie A safety after replacing Stefano Pioli in February and has been heavily paired with a move to Manchester City in recent weeks.

"I have not signed with anyone and I challenge anyone to contradict me on that," said Ranieri to the Manchester Evening News.

"Now I will take a three-day break, talk to Parma and we will make a relaxed decision together," added the former Chelsea boss.

Manchester City have a prospective new owner in former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is allegedly ready to make Ranieri a tempting offer to replace the axed Stuart Pearce.

Former England boss Sven-Goran Eriksson, Ruud Gullit, Juande Ramos and ex-Bundesliga legend Felix Magath have also been paired with a move to Eastlands.

Jankovic wants to end Serbian gloom

Tennis

AFP, Paris

Jelena Jankovic is fed-up of Serbia forever being associated with the dark days of civil war, political assassinations and UN sanctions.

"I'm just a person who likes to laugh," she said after a 6-2, 6-2 win over France's Stephanie Foretz gave her a place in the French Open second round on Tuesday.

"I like to enjoy life and laugh, make jokes especially with my team. We all have a good sense of humour. It helps to stay positive and to work hard."

Jankovic is being talked of as a potential champion here.

She was voted the most improved player on the tour in 2006 when she made the US Open semifinals and came into Paris having captured three titles in 2007 in Auckland, Charleston and

and better."

Like Djokovic, who once walked on court at the Paris Masters wearing a Zorro mask, Jankovic enjoys the lighter side of life, punctuating her press conferences with a stream of giggles.

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"It's amazing what a difference a year can make," she said.

"I'm number four in the world. I don't know how to explain it. Winning three titles this year with two Tier 1 tournaments on clay gave me a lot of confidence especially coming into the French Open."

"Hopefully I can continue."

Jankovic, who is based full-time in Florida, also hopes that her success and the emergence of Ivanovic and Djokovic will inspire youngsters in Serbia to take up the sport.

"I think all the Serbian top players are motivating the kids. Hopefully we will also get a tennis centre. They are trying to build one. It will help the youngsters to develop their games and to improve so that they don't have to go outside the country and practice."