



PHOTO: AFP

(L) Back-in-squad England star David Beckham curls in his trademark free-kick over a jumping Brazilian wall while (R) Brazil's fringe striker Diego celebrates his last-gasp equaliser during their friendly at the newly-built Wembley Stadium on Friday.

Beckham shines on return

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham does not do low key. The Real Madrid midfielder is modern football's most remarkable marketing phenomenon and his return to international football was always likely to be a showstopper.

He did not disappoint. Beckham capped his fairytale comeback to England colours on Friday with a decisive contribution to his side's opening goal, whipping in an inch-perfect free-kick for John Terry, arriving late at the back post, to thump home with glee.

There was a neat symmetry in Beckham, England's captain until their ignominious World Cup exit to Portugal last year, setting up his new leader for the side's first goal at the new Wembley, but the jubilant celebrations were as much for the symbol of the side's past as its future.

On the touchline, too, there was joy unconfined. Steve McClaren's decision to welcome back Beckham into the international fold had not met with unanimous approval but when Terry's header bulged the net, England's embattled head coach looked to the heavens and punched the air.

His mood may have been soured by Diego's last-gasp equaliser but, for now at least, his

judgement has been vindicated.

If ever there was an occasion tailor-made for a man of Beckham's chutzpah, it was surely this: a gleaming new Wembley, Brazil in town and all bathed in balmy conditions more suited to down-town Los Angeles than north-west London.

Regardless of Diego's late intervention, this was Beckham's night. The reading of his name moments before kick-off produced an ear-splitting roar and his first touch, a tidy lay-off to Steven Gerrard, must have soothed any lingering nerves.

But if the supporters crammed into this glittering arena were expecting to witness Beckham's re-birth as an international foot-baller, they were mistaken.

All his strengths were present and correct -- the zooming cross-field passes and boundless energy -- so were the foibles.

There was certainly no hint that Beckham had acquired the discipline necessary to fulfil his duties as a right-sided midfielder: he began to drift inexorably into the middle almost as soon as the whistle had blown.

Beckham has always felt more comfortable dictating the pace and pattern of a match from the centre but, when he is coupled with Gerrard and Frank Lampard, it is a destructive tendency which makes England far too narrow for comfort.

The fault-lines were laid bare as

half-time approached when Beckham, collecting the ball just outside the centre-circle, wheeled around, seeking to slip a pass to an onrushing right-winger, only to find nothing but empty space.

It was he, of course, who had vacated it moments earlier.

Such failings can be forgiven when Goldenball's dead-balls are at their most destructive but the initial signs were that his radar was skewed. The crowd chattered with anticipation in the 28th minute when Gerrard was scythed down by Mineiro on the fringe of the penalty area, but Beckham's free-kick arced just wide.

It took until the 68th minute for Beckham to find his range. His free-kick from tight against the right-hand touchline was delivered with all the expert precision and firecracker pace of old and Terry, once he had leapt above his marker, Naldo, could hardly miss.

With more Italy stars abandoning international duty, Alessandro Del Piero assures he'll always fly the flag.

Following Francesco Totti's sabbatical from the Azzurri, now Alessandro Nesta has followed suit in retiring so that he can focus on club football.

Only time will tell if this was his final hurrah or the start of a most unexpected Indian summer.

Porto snap up samba star

AFP, Lisbon

FC Porto have snapped up Brazil under-20 midfielder Fernando Francisco Reges on a five-year deal, according to the Portuguese first division champions' website Saturday.

The 19-year-old, who plays for Brazilian side Vila Nova, spent the past five days going through a medical before inking the "dream" deal.

"It's a dream come true for me. I'm young, but I'm desperate to play in Europe," said the Brasilia-born teenager.

Del Piero appreciates Azzurri

INTERNET, undated

With more Italy stars abandoning international duty, Alessandro Del Piero assures he'll always fly the flag.

Following Francesco Totti's sabbatical from the Azzurri, now Alessandro Nesta has followed suit in retiring so that he can focus on club football.

"Do I care about the Italy squad? Of course I do!" exclaimed the Juventus captain. "In fact, it's ridiculous to ask me how much and why I care."

"You don't need to ask me this question... I think that my history shows how attached I am to the

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Diego saves Brazil blushes

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham was denied a winning return for England as Diego headed a late equaliser to earn Brazil a 1-1 friendly international draw on Friday.

But Beckham has always had a flair for the dramatic and it was almost inevitable that he marked his first appearance for England since last year's World Cup by setting up John Terry's second half-opener.

The Real Madrid midfielder had been recalled by McClaren just 10 months after the coach had sent him into international exile and the gamble paid instant dividends at Wembley.

England captain Terry had promised Beckham, winning his 95th cap, that he would allow him to take over the captaincy when he makes his 100th appearance and Beckham quickly returned the favour.

His perfectly-weighted free-kick allowed Terry to head home in the second half before Diego robbed England of their first win over Brazil in 17 years with a stoppage time

strike.

Beckham has remained a firm favourite with the England fans and his name was greeted with an ear-splitting roar when the team was read out just before kick-off.

England were back at Wembley after seven years waiting for the national stadium to be rebuilt. This was the new 800 million pound arena's first senior international and the 88,000 crowd gave McClaren's team a rapturous welcome home.

The carnival atmosphere obscured the fact that McClaren desperately needed a positive performance to take into Wednesday's crucial Euro 2008 qualifier in Estonia.

McClaren has endured a miserable first year in charge and his rocky relationship with England fans and media would not have withstood a heavy defeat against the five-times World Cup winners.

Beckham was quickly into the thick of the action with a long pass that Michael Owen was just unable to reach. With Beckham working tirelessly to close down Brazil and Steven Gerrard crunching into a series of full-blooded challenges, England looked more dynamic than

they had in their woeful displays against Israel and Andorra.

Brazil still came closest to taking the lead in the first half. Gilberto Silva thought he had scored when he looped a header over Paul Robinson from Naldo's cross, but the Brazil captain's effort was ruled out for offside, even though television replays showed he was clearly onside.

When Gerrard was tripped on the edge of the penalty area the stage was set for Beckham to mark his return with one of his trademark free-kicks. Flashbulbs illuminated Wembley as the Real Madrid midfielder stepped up, but his effort whizzed just wide of Helton's far post.

Beckham wasn't the only England player keen to make up for lost time. Owen was back in an England shirt after finally recovering from the serious knee injury he suffered at the World Cup, but the striker was well short of his predatory best.

Brazil were content to go through the motions for long periods, but any team including Ronaldinho and Kaka will always be capable of conjuring a goal from nothing.

It took a superb reflex save from Robinson to keep England level just after half-time as he turned over a Ronaldinho shot that deflected off Ledley King.

No-one could ever question Beckham's set-piece delivery and he provided a half-chance for Owen with a precise free-kick that the Newcastle striker glanced over.

McClaren sent on Stewart Downing for Joe Cole and the Middlesbrough winger almost scored with his first touch as his long-range drive was brilliantly tipped over by Helton.

Beckham had served notice of his danger from dead-ball situations, but Brazil failed to heed the warning.

He whipped in a deep 66th minute free-kick to the far post and Terry rose above Naldo to buried his header past Helton.

Beckham went off to a standing ovation with 13 minutes left, but he was cruelly denied his match-winning moment as Brazil snatched a stoppage time equaliser.

Gilberto Silva sent over a teasing cross and Diego found space to plant a diving header past Robinson.

Uruguay conquers down under

Football

AFP, Sydney

Understudy goalkeeper Brad Jones dropped a clanger to allow Uruguay to come from behind and beat Australia 2-1 in a football friendly here Saturday.

The Socceroos, gearing up for July's Asian Cup without seven of their European stars, took a shock seventh-minute lead.

But the Uruguayans, tuning up for the Copa America, hit back with goals from Diego Forlan and Alvaro Recoba for their first win in Australia in five matches.

Australia looked set for a deserved draw before Jones, getting a rare appearance in place of Middlesbrough teammate Mark Schwarzer, missed substitute Guillermo Giacomazzi's cross for Recoba to head home into an empty net 13 minutes from the final whistle.

The Australians, playing without World Cup stars Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka, Mark Bresciano, Vince Grella, Tim Cahill, John Aloisi and Schwarzer, struck early when Basel's Mile Sterjovski scored after a goalmouth scramble.

A cross by Blackburn Rovers player Brett Emerton from the right had deflected Diego Lugano and Carlos Diogo in all sorts of bother and goalkeeper Fabian Carini was unable to clear.

Sterjovski rammed the ball into the net at his third attempt.

Inter Milan's Recoba took more control of the midfield in his roaming role and his long-range free kick was headed just wide by skipper

Lugano, before Recoba found unmarked Diego Forlan five minutes before halftime.

Forlan, who missed the 2005 World Cup playoff, which propelled Australia into their first World Cup finals in 32 years, only arrived Thursday and had just one full day's training in preparation for the match.

Recoba rolled the ball across the Australian goal and defender Patrick Kisnorbo failed to clear, allowing Forlan to slot home from close range.

Another teasing Recoba free kick caused problems in the home defence minutes later and Dario Rodriguez's header was palmed clear by goalkeeper Jones diving to his right.

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Lehmann unsure of Arsenal place

AFP, Berlin

Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann said Friday that he agreed a new contract at the London club, despite knowing he was not guaranteed a starting berth in Arsene Wenger's team.

Wenger has signed Polish international Lukasz Fabianski, who at 22 is 15 years Lehmann's junior and widely regarded as a hot future prospect.

And Lehmann was made fully aware he could no longer consider himself an automatic first choice player.

"The coach told me certain things during an interview and I

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Buffon backs Ranieri

INTERNET, undated

Juventus are determined to have Claudio Ranieri on the bench next season and Gianluigi Buffon agrees he's ready to remain if that's the case.

The goalkeeper had warned he was looking to leave if Didier Deschamps was not replaced by Marcello Lippi, but following the World Cup winning tactician's refusal to come out of retirement, other avenues are opening up.

All of Italy's newspapers reported yesterday that a meeting with Gianluca Vialli did not go well, but that contact with Ranieri reached a basic agreement.

The only problem currently is the length of his contract and the issue of staff. It's claimed Ranieri has requested a two-year deal and that Juve would prefer to keep the

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Uruguay's flamboyant Alvaro Recoba races past the Australia defence during their friendly at the Telstra Stadium in Sydney on Saturday.

Pizarro Chelsea's

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea have followed Manchester United's recent spending spree by boosting their attacking reserves with the signing of Peruvian forward Claudio Pizarro.

Pizarro quit German giants Bayern Munich on a free transfer to join the Stamford Bridge outfit.

His sale followed Bayern's signing of Italian World Cup winning forward Luca Toni from Fiorentina earlier this week.

Pizarro had found himself being pushed down the pecking order in Munich, behind Roy Makaay, Lukas

Podolski and now Toni.

And with the likes of Didier Drogba and Andrey Shevchenko at the west London club, he is hardly likely to figure any more regularly, though he said it was trophies that interested him.

"I think it's very important for me to win some titles and I have the chance here to win them," he told Chelsea TV.

"The most important thing is the Champions League which I was looking to win with Bayern, but we didn't have the chance.

"I think now we have a good team, a good trainer and the chance to win it. I had some interesting offers, but the most important thing was that I talked to the coach, I

talked to the people here, and they were very interested.

"We have many chances to win titles here and that's what I want.

"I get used very fast to playing with different kinds of players. I did it at Bayern and I don't think it will be a problem now."

The signing is Chelsea's second of the summer following the recruitment of Oldham starlet Danny Pilkington.

Pizarro had been expected to put pen to paper on a four-year deal at Stamford Bridge with unsettled defender Khalid Boulahrouz tipped for a move in the opposite direction.

Boulahrouz has failed to settle

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