



PHOTO: AFP

LA Galaxy midfielder David Beckham signals to the packed stadium after setting up a goal in their MLS match against NY Red Bulls at the Giants Stadium in New Jersey on Saturday.

Beckham entertains

Football

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham made his first Major League Soccer start, Giants Stadium filled back up for soccer and the Galaxy and Red Bulls filled the net at a near-record pace.

Bringing back memories of the days Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and Giorgio Chinaglia brought excitement to soccer in the United States more than 25 years ago, Beckham drew 66,237 and helped set up three goals as Los Angeles lost a wild one, 5-4 to New York on Saturday night.

Giants Stadium is nearly empty for most Red Bulls' games — the team's average of 11,573 for its first 10 home matches was next to last in the league. The crowd that came out for Beckham was the largest in

franchise history and the largest there for a U.S. league game since the Cosmos drew 70,312 against Fort Lauderdale on June 22, 1980.

"It makes you feel great. It makes you feel honored," Beckham said. "And hopefully, it continues, because this is what this league needs, this is what this sport needs in America."

Beckham played his first full game since joining the Galaxy last month and did it on artificial turf, no less. An injured left ankle had caused the 32-year-old midfielder to miss five games and come in as a late sub in two others. He made his first start Wednesday, playing 63 minutes in a SuperLiga match.

He limped at the end and his ankle was swollen, but he hopes to make his 97th appearance for England in an exhibition against Germany at Wembley on Wednesday night, then play eight

time zones away Thursday night in MLS's version of a soccer "derby" — Los Angeles vs. Chivas USA in Carson, Calif.

"My ankle took quite a bit of pounding, of course. It's a surface that I'm obviously not used to playing on," he said. "There was a couple of instances that I sort of went over on my ankle. But at the end of the day we have to play on this surface."

It was the 10th time in MLS history teams combined for nine or more goals and just two shy of the record set when Los Angeles beat Columbus 7-4 on May 6, 1998.

"It was very different," Beckham said. "I haven't been involved in a game like that since I was 9 or 10 years old, where there were so many goals."

Fans showed some support for the home team, many booing Beckham when he took corner kicks and free kicks. But they also lit up

the stadium with camera flashes when he took his restarts, and they cheered him when he left the field, shirtless, displaying his many tattoos.

"I don't think there's anybody in this sport than can sell tickets the way he can," Red Bulls star Clint Mathis said. "You can't tell me that there were 60-, 65,000 soccer fans there today. There was probably people that had no idea of what the game was going on about. But that's the people that we need to continue to draw."

Beckham set up Carlos Pavan for goals in the sixth and eighth minutes, first with a corner kick and then with a 37-yard free kick. After current U.S. star Landon Donovan scored in the 71st, Beckham's corner kick in the 82nd led the goal that made it 4-1, with Edson Buddle scoring after Kyle Veris' header went off a post.

VDV fighting for Valencia

INTERNET, undated

Hamburg playmaker Rafael van der Vaart is still hopeful of a move to Valencia before the transfer window closes, despite his club's rejection of the Spanish side's advances.

The Dutch international was a key figure in the Hamburg side that qualified for the Champions League in his first season at the club, and though they underperformed badly last season, he was one of the few players whose reputation remained intact.

Now, though, he has incurred the wrath of the fans by publicly admitting his desire for a move, and criticizing chairman Bernd Hoffman for standing in his way.

"I still think I will play for Valencia and I'm going to keep fighting to do that even though there isn't much time left," the midfielder told Spanish daily As.

"The [Hamburg] president promised me that if there were any interesting offers for me, especially from Spain, then they would look at them. He isn't keeping his word."

Ramos denies Spurs link

INTERNET, undated

Sevilla coach Juande Ramos has moved to distance himself from speculation that he has held talks with Tottenham.

Spurs coach Martin Jol said his side pick up their first Premier League win of the season on Saturday with a 4-0 victory over Derby County, but on Sunday speculation in the British media continued to link Ramos with the London club.

Ramos, preparing Sevilla for Sunday's second leg of Spanish Super Cup against Real Madrid, played down the speculation on Saturday.

He told www.sevillafc.es: "Curiously, when we play an important game like this news of this kind always comes out. I don't know what the motivation is."

"All our attention should be on the match and I totally deny that we had a meeting. I think this has been done to unsettle us."

"News like this comes out every day and we cannot reply to stories like this. I was in the hotel because a friend came who had nothing to do with football."

Ramos has led Sevilla to two consecutive UEFA Cups.

Low's youthful Germany

Football

THE TIMES

There's a nice story told by Jurgen Klinsmann about the man who turned out to be his successor as head coach of Germany, Klinsmann had been sizing up Joachim Low's potential as his assistant ahead of the 2006 World Cup, and was swung not by his snappy dress sense Low likes clothes but by a vivid explanation of how a flat back-four should move, relative to one another.

"You know," said Klinsmann, "I was a professional for 18 years, and in those 18 years no coach could ever explain that to me. And in one minute he made me understand how it works." And so they sailed on together, the blond with his steely blue eyes in the foreground, the mildly dashing, dark-haired Low behind him. All the way to a World Cup semi-final, sweeping away a decade of gathering pessimism around Germany's national game, becoming affectionately known as "Klinsi" and "Jogi" to their admirers.

"I'm not your boss, we're together on board the ship," Klinsi told Jogi at the beginning of the World Cup adventure. And when Klinsi disembarked at the end of it, to return to his life in California, Jogi had gained

sufficient profile to become the leading candidate for the job of chief coach. Low is 47 and had a hop-scotch coaching career before Klinsmann took him on. A German Under21 international striker as a player, he started well in Bundesliga management, guiding Stuttgart to a Cup-Winners' Cup final they lost to Chelsea in 1998 and then became a bit of a voyager, with clubs in Turkey and Austria.

None of which compares for success with his first 12 months in charge of Germany, whom he brings to Wembley as the most impressively placed of all the teams in qualifying for Euro 2008.

Nor are Jogi's Germany merely a replica of Klinsi's. They have some of the same spirit, the desire for swift, even swashbuckling football, but Low has been discovering that his resources may be deeper than suspected even during the World Cup.

Wembley, being a friendly, will not truly find them out even if England have a strong night there, although the squad Low brings have been made aware that the venue obliges the Germans to make of the night something special. Announcing his party for the trip to London, Low was flanked by German players of various eras including Uwe Seeler and Paul Breitner, and their audience was

given a show of England-Germany meetings at Wembley through history. The last of those was in 2000, when Kevin Keegan resigned as England manager, Didi Hamann scored the only goal and Rudi Voller had Low's job. None of the players who started for the winning team that afternoon will be in Low's XI on Wednesday. Only Michael Ballack might have acted as a link, but the Chelsea midfielder is unavailable. So are Torsten Frings and Tim Borowski, which leaves Low seeking a new centre to his team.

There are likely to be one or two debutants. The two Stuttgart players, Serdar Tasci and Sami Khedira, both 20, were added to the squad, with Low saying he would "like to learn more about them". The group contains four Bayern Munich players and four from Stuttgart, dividend of that club's status as German champions they won the league on its final afternoon and a Bundesliga title achieved on the back of a fine youth development system. A hero of Stuttgart's gripping title pursuit, Thomas Hitzlsperger, is also included. Not too long ago he was deemed not good enough for the Aston Villa first-team.

At Wembley, Hitzlsperger may be put in charge of Germany's midfield. In a young squad, Jens Lehmann looks conspicuously the senior man. The Arsenal goalkeeper may yet have a long journey to go with Low, however; the coach has expressed concern that his other keeper, Timo Hildebrand, has moved from Stuttgart to a club, Valencia, where he could start the season as second choice.

Klinsmann's reign was distinguished by his readiness to promote quickly, but if Low has willingly gathered that baton, it is not with the expected personnel. None of the starlets of Germany 2006, such as full-back Philipp Lahm, striker Lucas Podolski and the wide players Bastian Schweinsteiger and David Odonkor, had brilliant domestic seasons after the tournament. Low may be more unhappy about the absence of Mario Gomez, the young Stuttgart forward and Bundesliga player of the year.

"It's a bit of a strain on us," said Low of the half-dozen injuries, "but we are not going to complain."



PHOTO: AFP

Valencia striker David Villa (R) struggles for possession alongside Parma defender Ferreira Da Silva during their Orange Trophy match at Mestalla on Saturday.

Celtic confident over Nakamura

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic chiefs are confident that Japanese midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura will follow in the footsteps of former striker Henrik Larsson by extending his current deal with the Scottish champions.

Celtic chief executive Peter Lawwell dismissed summer speculation about Nakamura's future, which was fuelled by Italian lawyer Angelo Massoni's claim the Japan international one million pound (two million dollars) get-out clause.

And the Celtic chief revealed the 29-year-old had refused to entertain any approaches.

"We're used to speculation surrounding Shunsuke," Lawwell told the Sunday Mail.

"It's frustrating because some of the things mentioned, such as a one million get-out clause, are total nonsense. Naka loves playing at Celtic and loves the fans. He has found a home here."

Lawwell plans contract talks with the former Reggina player and agent Robert Takuda in the coming months.

"He is contracted until summer 2008 then we have a one-year option," he said. "We will sit down with his agent in December or early January and decide what's going to happen."

"Naka might decide to stay on for a few years or indicate he wants to move on."

"But I know he likes it here and has refused to entertain any nibbles at him about moving on."

"We've had interest from other clubs. Approaches have been made to him and us."

Lawwell compared the midfielder's situation with former Hoops striker Henrik Larsson, who stayed in Glasgow for seven years despite interest from some of Europe's biggest clubs.

"We are a good club and do things in a professional manner," Lawwell said.

"It shouldn't be underestimated what it's like to be here as a player."

"The grass isn't always greener if you leave and Naka knows that."

Owen close to best

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle United manager Sam Allardyce has warned it could be weeks before England striker Michael Owen is back to his best.

Owen made his first English Premier League appearance of the season as Newcastle maintained their unbeaten start to the campaign in a disappointing 0-0 stalemate with Aston Villa at St James's Park on Saturday.

The 16-million-pound (31.9-million-dollar, 23.6-million-euro) club record signing, who missed the start of the season with a thigh problem, made little impression after his introduction as a substitute midway through the second-half in front of watching England head coach Steve McClaren.

Injury-plagued Owen, who has been confined to just 15 Newcastle appearances since his high-profile arrival from Real Madrid almost two years ago, is set to step up his bid for match fitness by figuring in England's friendly against Germany at Wembley on Wednesday.

The weight of expectation will rest squarely on Owen's shoulders to provide the goals to boost England's flagging qualifying campaign for the

2008 European Championships.

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney is sidelined by a fractured left foot for the Wembley double header against Israel and Russia at the start of September.

However, Allardyce insists it could be well into the middle of next month before 27-year-old Owen is back to his sharpest.

"Michael was there today, but he's not really back yet," he said after Saturday's match.

"At a guess, it could be one or two games, it could be four or five or it could be six before we see the sharp end of Michael Owen."

"If Steve McClaren gives him some part of the Germany match then that will be a great help and we hope there's no injuries from that."

Allardyce professed himself happy with a point as Steve Harper preserved Newcastle's unbeaten start to the season, the stand-in goalkeeper producing fine saves to thwart Martin Laursen and Nigel Reo-Coker.

Newcastle were denied a win, and a first home league goal since February — 560 minutes of play — by Villa goalkeeper Scott Carson, who marked his debut on loan from Liverpool with a fine full-length save to deny David Rozehnal's early angled drive.

"We found it hard from an attacking

point of view to break a very solid defence down. All we needed was a break and for someone to pull something out of the bag for us," Allardyce said.

"I'm happy with four points from two games, it's a good start to the season. Aston Villa matched us, but clean sheets make me happy and it's a fantastic result."

After claiming a first point of the season, Villa manager Martin O'Neill said: "We were under a bit of pressure to get something and we're frustrated and disappointed with the way the game went that we didn't come away with all three points."

"I thought we were the better side and it was a really good performance. The players were very strong and very determined and we should have won it."

"We got a point to show for it but we are very disappointed in the dressing room that we haven't taken it. There was a bit of pressure to get something."

"With it being Newcastle's opening fixture at St James's, you might have been tempted to say 'let's just get something', but the way it went we are disappointed."



PHOTO: AFP

GOOD TO BE BACK: Newcastle United striker Michael Owen (L) holds off Aston Villa defenders Chris Gardner (C) and Olof Mellberg during their Premier League match at St James's Park on Saturday.