



PINBALL! Australia midfielder Mark Bresciano (L) unleashes a 25-yard free kick that started off normally enough by hitting the crossbar -- the shot then bounced off Argentine goalkeeper Roberto Abbondanzieri's head onto the crossbar again and back to Abbondanzieri's shoulder and again back onto the crossbar and then rolled harmlessly out -- in their international friendly match against Argentina at the MCG on Tuesday.

Favourites face tough battle

AFP, Paris



Footballing he a y-
weigts
England,
F r a n c e ,
Spain and Italy are all in Euro 2008
action on Wednesday as qualifying
for the finals in Austria and
Switzerland moves into the home
straight.

With November 21 the final day
of qualifying for this continental
tournament, time is running out for
teams to ensure they fill one of the
top two spots in the seven qualifying
groups.

Scotland, in tough qualifying
Group B with both World Cup finalists
Italy and France, could also crank up
their bid to break through into the 16-
team finals following their match in
France on Wednesday.

Substitute goal scorer in
Scotland's 3-1 win over Lithuania at
Hampden on Saturday, Jamie
McFadden, said that victory and their
1-0 win last October over France had
put them in a confident mood.

"We believe we can get a result

and I think the way we have been
playing backs that up," said the
Everton forward. "You need confidence
going into games and there is no better confidence than winning games."

Despite their tough draw, Scotland are second in group B, just one point behind leaders France and one point ahead of world champions Italy. If Scotland qualify for Euro 2008, it will be the first time they have competed in an international tournament since the 1998 World Cup in France.

Even defeat at the Parc des Princes would not rule out Scotland going on to claim an unlikely place in the European Championship, with games against Ukraine and Georgia to come next month.

Steve McClaren faces the acid test of his belief that England's qualifying campaign is back on track as Guus Hiddink brings his Russian revolution to Wembley.

McClaren's side finally showed signs of life with a convincing win over Israel last weekend, but their bid to reach next year's finals will be given a stern examination by one of

Europe's pre-eminent coaches.

Russia are a point ahead of England, who still have to travel to Moscow in October, and a win for Hiddink's unbeaten team in London would further damage McClaren's credibility and, more importantly, his team's Euro hopes.

Hiddink has quickly established Russia as one of the most resolute teams in Europe in just over a year in the job, while McClaren, in the same period, has been engaged in a permanent struggle to convince a sceptical public of his worth.

Ukraine approach their Group B qualifier against world champions Italy in a must-win situation to keep their hopes alive.

Ukraine, who lost 3-0 to Italy in the quarter-finals of last year's World Cup, are now in fourth slot with 13 points from seven matches, four points behind third-placed Italy.

Ukrainian manager Oleg Blokhin said he remained confident that his side still had chances to obtain a pass to the Euro finals despite an unexpected points loss in Tbilisi, where Ukraine were held to a 1-1 draw on Saturday.

Meanwhile Spain, in third spot in Group F, aim to beef up their challenge for a top-two spot at home to Latvia.

"I'm an optimist and believe we still have chances to win a place in the finals," he told AFP.

"We still have a game in hand unlike our main rivals France, Scotland and Italy.

"I know well how many mistakes we made in the match at Georgia. And I believe we are able to avoid them in the match with Italy. It's our last opportunity to keep our chances for a place in the finals alive."

The Republic of Ireland take on the Czech Republic in Prague anxious to pick themselves up after their injury-time heartache against Slovakia at the weekend.

Steve Staunton's side appeared to have done enough to add three points to their campaign until the Slovaks levelled for the second time.

A win would take third-placed the Republic into second in Group D ahead of the Czechs and behind runaway leaders Germany who sit out these latest batch of qualifiers on the road to Switzerland and Austria next year.

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AC Milan's Brazilian playmaker Kaka is the highest earning footballer in Italy with an annual salary of six million euros, according to a study published in Tuesday's *Gazzetta dello Sport*.

Other high earning players are Roma captain and Italy striker Francesco Totti with 5.46 million euros, Italy and Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon at five million euros, with three Inter players - Frenchman Patrick Vieira, Brazilian Adriano and Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic - earning the same amount.

AC Milan has the biggest wages bill at 120 million euros a year.

Kaka richest in Italy

AFP, Rome

German head coach Joachim Loew recalled midfielder Bernd Schneider on Tuesday and gave him the captain's armband for Wednesday night's tough friendly against a buoyant Romanian side in Cologne.

Miroslav Klose captained Germany and scored twice in Saturday's comfortable 2-0 win over Wales, but Loew has made Schneider skipper after he missed Cardiff's Euro 2008 qualifier serving a one-match suspension.

Schneider, 33, will be winning his 80th cap against Romania and will be alongside Bayern Munich's mid-fielder Bastian Schweinsteiger who earned the man-of-the-match award in Cardiff.

Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann makes way for Timo

Hildebrand and the Valencia shot-stopper will be given the full 90 minutes according to Loew.

But the 28-year-old who won his first cap against Romania in 2004 will be hoping for a better result than his debut when Germany lost 5-1 in Bucharest.

Bayern Leverkusen's Simon Rolfes and Stuttgart's Thomas Hitzlsperger will be alongside Schneider and Schweinsteiger in midfield.

And having recovered from a knee injury, Bayern Munich's Lukas Podolski, the best young player at last year's World Cup, will partner second-division Cologne's Patrick Hennes up front.

German player of the year, VfB Stuttgart's striker Mario Gomez, is out after suffering with flu while defender Christian Pander will be missing with a thigh strain.

But influential Bayer Leverkusen mid-fielder Bernd Schneider, who

tonight that I've never seen in 30-odd years in the game," Australian coach Graham Arnold said of the incident.

"It was incredible."

Argentina finally opened the scoring four minutes into the second half through defender Demichelis.

David Carney fouled Tevez just outside the box and Demichelis met Messi's free kick with a glancing header into the corner of the net, giving keeper Mark Schwarzer no chance.

The Socceroos almost hit back twice minutes later but were denied by Abbondanzieri, who tipped out goal-bound shots from Carney and Bresciano in the 52nd and 53rd minutes.

Australia tried hard for an equaliser but lacked composure in front of goal.

TEAMS

AUSTRALIA: Mark Schwarzer, Lucas Neill, Michael Beauchamp, David Carney, Jason Culina, Luke Wilshire, Josip Skoko (Carl Valeri 51), Vince Grella, Mark Bresciano (Brett Holman 59), Josh Kennedy (Nick Mrdja 82), Archie Thompson (Nick Carle 62)

ARGENTINA: Roberto Abbondanzieri, Gabriel Heinze, Javier Zanetti, Nicholas Burdisso, Gabriel Milito, Martin Demichelis, Federico Insua (Christian Ledesma 81), Javier Mascherano, Jonas Gutierrez (Fernando Gago 72), Lionel Messi (Sergio Aguero 89), Carlos Tevez (Javier Saviola 84).

Argentina show true class

Football

AFP, Melbourne

Argentina defender Martin Demichelis scored the only goal in an entertaining 1-0 friendly win against Australia here on Tuesday.

In a high-quality match, Demichelis upstaged his more illustrious teammates Carlos Tevez and Lionel Messi when he headed home four minutes into the second half.

Playing in front of 71,171 fans at Melbourne Cricket Ground, Australia tried valiantly but could never quite match the class of the visitors, who are building up to their World Cup qualifying campaign beginning next month.

Argentina brought a full-strength squad to Australia, but the Socceroos were forced to field a weakened side without key European-based players Mark Viduka, Harry Kewell and Tim Cahill.

However the Australians gave it everything and were unlucky not to salvage a draw in the end-to-end encounter.

Argentina coach Alfio Basile expressed delight at his team, which he will leave largely unchanged for the World Cup qualifiers.

"I was very impressed with the first half -- the first half was outstanding," Basile said.

"The second half they kept possession of the ball and killed off the dynamic Australian attack.

"Towards the end of the game

they started to run out of legs because of the time-difference and because they've had to travel all this distance."

The two teams were locked at 0-0 at half time but both could have scored two or three times in an enterprising first period.

Strikers Tevez and Messi created havoc with their sheer pace, with Barcelona's Messi in particular looking dangerous every time he got the ball.

But the Australians also had their chances in the first half as the two teams turned on the style for the large crowd.

Australia went close to opening the scoring in the sixth minute when a Jason Culina cross caused chaos, forcing a save from goalkeeper Roberto Abbondanzieri.

But the Australians then had to endure a string of attacking raids and were lucky not to concede at least twice as Tevez, Gabriel Heinze, Messi and Nicolas Burdisso all missed good chances.

Barcelona striker Messi then rounded three Australian defenders and unleashed a blistering strike from 25 metres that crashed into the post with goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer beaten.

However the Argentines were lucky to survive when a 25th minute Mark Bresciano free-kick hit the crossbar then bounced onto Abbondanzieri's head, back onto the crossbar then against the goalkeeper's back.

"I saw something in football

Captain Schneider back

Football

AFP, Berlin

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But Romania will be a tough game for Germany after they beat Belarus 3-1 in a Euro 2008 qualifier last Saturday and lead the Netherlands by three points.

And the last time the side's met, Romania hammered Germany 5-1 in Bucharest.

Terry wary of Russia threat

AFP, London



John Terry has warned that Russia will provide England with a much tougher test of their Euro 2008 qualifying credentials than Israel did at the weekend.

"When the pressure is really on, we do rise to it," Terry said. "Against Israel, right from the word go we set the tempo and put them under a lot of pressure early on and got the crowd right behind us."

"They felt the pressure and that was our mentality before the game. If we get something similar against a good side, it will affect their game."

With four matches to play in the qualifying campaign, England know they cannot afford any slip-ups if they are to reach next year's finals.

"Russia are a much more organised side, maybe a lot better (than Israel)," Terry said. "But we rose to the challenge at the weekend and we have got to do it again."

"That's why the home game is going to be massive," Terry said. "It (Moscow) is a tough place to go, especially with the pitch, but if we can get the right result here we can assess things."

McLaren had been expected to name an unchanged side after learning on Monday that neither Owen Hargreaves or Frank Lampard had sufficiently recovered from thigh injuries to be risked against Russia.

But he hinted there could be changes to his line-up to neutralise what is expected to be a 3-5-1-1 Russian line-up.

"It is a different challenge, a tougher challenge," the former Middlesbrough boss said.

"Russia play a different system, much as we would like to keep the same shape and formation, we may have to tweak one or two things."

The most likely change to England's line-up is in attack, SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

North Korea scare US

Football

AFP, Chengdu

North Korea gave the United States a wake-up call Tuesday in a 2-2 draw as Japan scored a last-gasp equaliser to share the spoils with England in their opening women's World Cup games.

The Koreans were 2-1 up with just over 20 minutes to play before two-time champions the United States scrambled an equaliser to ensure they took a point in what is considered the toughest group of the tournament.

Fortunately for them, Sweden also drew their match in Group B, failing for a fifth consecutive time to win their opening game at a World Cup.

The United States and Sweden

reduced to 10 players after Wambach came off second best in an aerial battle and left the ground, her head bleeding.

North Korea took advantage with Kil Son Hui launching a thunderous shot that sailed over the head of goalkeeper Hope Solo for the equaliser. Kim Yong Ae smashed a second four minutes later, leaving the US reeling.

But Wambach came back on two minutes later and the tide began to turn with forward Heather O'Reilly ensuring they shared the points with a strike in the 69th minute.

North Korean coach Kim Kwang Min said he was "satisfied".

"I think the US team is the best team in the world but today they did not perform to the maximum that they can," he said.

Also in Chengdu, Sweden got their tournament off to a shaky start against Nigeria.

Captain Victoria Svensson did

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Goal glut dismisses Blatter

Football

AFP, Chengdu

FIFA president Sepp Blatter on Tuesday admitted the one-sided 11-0 score line in the opening match of the women's World Cup was "not good" for the sport.