



PHOTO: AFP
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 heavyweights England, France, 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 Gus 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.

"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.

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

Kaka richest in Italy

AFP, Rome

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.

Toni out with thigh injury

AFP, Munich

Record German champions Bayern Munich will be without Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni for their Bundesliga home game against Schalke 04 on Saturday, it was revealed on Tuesday.

The 30-year-old is still struggling with the thigh injury he suffered while scoring for Bayern in their 3-0 rout of Hanover on August 25.

Toni trained with the Italian squad prior to last week's 0-0 draw with France in Milan, but did not play in Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier.

The Italian has been an instant hit at Bayern since his 11 million euros (15 million dollars) summer switch from Fiorentina having scored a goal in each of his three appearances for Bayern.

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

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).

Captain Schneider back



Football

AFP, Berlin

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 midfielder 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 Helmes 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 midfielder Bernd Schneider, who

was suspended for Saturday's win in Wales, has been added by Loew with captain Michael Ballack and Torsten Frings both missing with injuries.

The Germans warm-up for next month's important Euro 2008 qualifiers against the Republic of Ireland and the Czech Republic by taking on a Romanian side who are unbeaten in Group G.

The Germans have a five-point lead at the top of Group D and wins over the Irish in Dublin and the Czechs in Munich will almost guarantee them a place at next summer's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland.

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.

Finnan to miss out

AFP, Dublin

Republic of Ireland defender Steve Finnan will miss his country's crucial Euro 2008 qualifier against the Czech Republic on Wednesday.

The Liverpool right back has been unable to recover from the knee injury that also forced him out of Saturday's 2-2 draw with Slovakia.

Ireland manager Steve Staunton is also without Wolverhampton midfielder Darren Potter through injury and Manchester City's Stephen Ireland, who has withdrawn after the death of his grandmother.

Staunton will give Kevin Doyle and Richard Dunne fitness tests ahead of the game in Prague.

Real turned down Alves

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid turned down the chance to sign fullback Daniel Alves this summer, according to club president Ramon Calderon.

The Sevilla defender was the subject of much interest during the transfer window, with Chelsea reportedly keen on taking the Brazilian to the Premier League.

But Calderon claims it was the Spanish champions who were offered the player, only for coach Bernd Schuster to turn down the 24-year-old because his squad was already strong enough.

"Madrid could have bought Dani Alves, but it did not happen because the coach felt he had the best team in Europe," said Calderon.

Real have long been criticised for buying in the biggest names in football at the expense of the wider team, but the 120 million euros spent on eight new players this summer already seems to have paid off.

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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.

In the night's other match, 2003 runner-ups Sweden drew 1-1 with African champions Nigeria.

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

now face a crunch tie on Friday. North Korea take on Nigeria on the same day.

The Americans were early favourites to win their third World Cup title here over defending champions Germany but they were clearly rattled by North Korea, who have never reached the knockout stages of a World Cup.

"I'm very proud of my players especially to come back in the game after giving up two goals when we were a man down, I'm very proud of the way we came back," US coach Greg Ryan said.

Playing in front of a 35,000-strong crowd in drizzling rain, the Koreans dominated the first half, but it was the United States who came out firing in the second period.

Abby Wambach made the breakthrough in the 50th minute, chesting the ball down before firing her shot past keeper Jon Myong Hui.

Disaster though struck just minutes later when the US were

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

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Goal glut dismays 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.

Asked about the hammering defending champions Germany dished out to Argentina on Monday, Blatter replied: "Definitely I did not like this result, I can honestly say that."

It came at a time when world football's governing body is considering whether to expand the competition from its current 16-team format to reflect the improving

standards of the game worldwide.

"When it is the opening match, the result of 11 to 0, and the team receiving 11 goals is the reigning champion in South America ... This is not good when we look forward to the future," he told a press conference.

Blatter added that FIFA would decide at the end of the tournament, which runs in China until September 30, whether to expand the next women's World Cup from 16 to 24 teams.

The host of the 2011 World Cup will be decided in Zurich at the end of October, with France, Canada, Australia and Peru vying for the honour.

"At the start of the competition, the result of 11-0, this will not

enhance the chances to do it, but it's only the first match," he said of the expansion plans.

"And I am sure the Argentinian team when playing later, they have to play England and Japan, I am sure that they will do it better."

He also criticised some of the Argentinian tactics, going for goal when they should have been defending.

"In women's football there is a lot to do in development," he said.

"We have seen on Monday some naive attitudes of the team receiving so many goals. Instead of trying to block a little bit in the defence, they tried ... to go for goal. (But) I can understand that, it is the World Cup."



England players Steven Gerrard (L) and Rio Ferdinand chat while they jog during a training session at London Colney on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

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