



Argentinian goalkeeper Romina Ferro (C) watches in horror as teammate Gabriela Chavez (R) fails to clear the ball which eventually goes wide during the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup football match against Japan at the Hongkou Stadium in Shanghai on Friday. Japan won 1-0.

Japan dash Argentine hopes

Football

AFP, Shanghai

Defending women's World Cup champions Germany were held to a goalless draw by arch-rival England Friday as the United States and North Korea took giant steps towards the quarter-finals.

Argentina became the first team to be eliminated after falling 1-0 to Japan. The defeat followed their 1-0 thrashing by the Germans in their opening game.

With just one match left to play against England on Monday, the South American champions have no chance of qualifying from Group A. England must win that game to keep their hopes alive.

Compared to their romp against Argentina, Germany had to work hard to earn a point in a drab 0-0 draw, unable to break down a solid English defence marshalled by

captain and central defender Faye White.

The point they earned leaves them top of their group ahead of Japan on goal difference from a crunch match between the two sides in Shanghai on Monday.

Strike sensation Abby Wambach led the United States to an emphatic 2-0 victory over European powerhouse Sweden in Chengdu to put them on top of Group B alongside North Korea, who beat Nigeria 2-0.

The Americans take on the African champions on Tuesday and, bar a major upset, will be in the knockout rounds.

Wambach, playing in her 98th international, scored both goals for the Americans to rip the heart out of the Swedes who finished runner-up in 2003.

"I'm so proud of my players, we knew this was potentially an elimination match against Sweden," said coach Greg Ryan.

Both sides were desperate to win

and secure three points after drawing their opening encounters in a group considered the toughest of the tournament.

Wambach, who suffered a bloodied head in the first match that needed stitches, struck in the 34th minute by coolly converting a penalty past goal keeper Hedvig Lindahl.

She then nailed victory for the Americans by chesting down inside the box a pinpoint pass from captain Kristine Lilly in the 58th minute, and unleashing a bullet from her left foot past a diving Lindahl.

"It's one of those goals that, as a forward, you say 'yeah I meant to put it exactly where it went', but in this type of situation I just hit it as hard as I could and it went in," Wambach said.

The Koreans stepped up their campaign to clinch a first-ever World Cup with first half goals from Kim Kyong Hwa and Ri Kum Suk.

The communist country look a

serious contender for the trophy, with their endless fast and aggressive attacks causing all sorts of problems for the Nigerians.

Japan left it late against Argentina, with Yuki Nagasato giving them a good shot at the quarter-finals.

"We had a hard time trying to score in the first half but I think the players played really well after the break," said Japan coach Hiroshi Ohashi.

"Winning the next game against Germany is what we are now focusing on."

For Argentina, it was the end of a heartbreaking campaign. They brought on two strikers as second half substitutes as they fought desperately to stay in the tournament to no avail.

"Today we suffered another painful loss," said coach Jose Borello. "But the players game 100 percent and compared to the last match it was better."

Schuster lapping up plaudits

AFP, Madrid



New Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster can do no wrong at the moment with a perfect two wins and playing the sort of exhilarating football that his predecessor Fabio Capello could not provide.

A maximum six points and seven goals scored represents a dream start for Schuster who had initially come under fire following an indifferent pre-season and a humiliating Super Cup defeat to Sevilla.

But that is all forgotten now and Schuster will hope the international break has not disrupted his team's rhythm as they look to continue their 100 percent start in Saturday's home match against promoted Almeria.

With just two games gone the Spanish league table has a familiar look to it with champions Real leading the 20-strong pack while arch rivals Barcelona lie third two points adrift.

Barcelona travel to Osasuna on Sunday aiming to build on their impressive 3-1 win over Athletic Bilbao last time out.

Barcelona were in fine form that night but their result was eclipsed by Real whose 5-0 rout of Villarreal represented their biggest away win in over a decade and this week club president Ramon Calderon went as far as saying Real are currently the best team in Europe.

"Right now Real Madrid is the best team in Europe. We may not have the best players but we have the best team on the continent," Calderon enthused.

Dutch international Wesley Sneijder, who inherited David Beckham's number 23 shirt, has been the star of the season so far scoring three goals to help power Real to the summit.

Sneijder, a 25-million-euro signing from Ajax, is already coming to terms with the inevitable comparisons to dead-ball specialist Beckham but says he is his own man.

"He has his qualities and I have mine. We are different players really and I don't do comparisons," said Sneijder.

"I didn't think I would score three goals in my first two games but it is nice. We have two victories to our name and the fans are enjoying our football so things are going well."

The arrival of Schuster also

appears to have given Raul a new lease of life with the former Spanish international scoring in both of Real's first two matches.

Raul, who is still only 30, has looked a shadow of himself in recent years and his combined return of 21 league goals over the past three seasons underlines his decline.

The revival of Real and Raul is bad news for Barcelona who are still coming to terms with throwing away the league title last season.

Manager Frank Rijkaard

knows he must deliver the championship this season but is not pressing the panic button just yet.

"Madrid have started well but there is a long, long way to go," said Rijkaard. "I have had a lot of luck with this team and the group has worked well for most of my time here and I am confident that will continue."

Along with Real Sevilla boast the league's only other 100 percent record and have the chance to make it two wins from two when they host Recreativo Huelva on Sunday.

Sevilla have played one game less due to a back-log of fixtures caused in part by the tragic death of their former Spanish international Antonio Puerta.

Sevilla have also had a turbulent time coping with want away Brazilian international Daniel Alves

who was furious at being priced out of move to Chelsea before the transfer deadline.

Right back Alves is back in the Sevilla starting line-up and coach Juande Ramos is not worried about his state of mind.

"Daniel is a professional and every time he steps onto the field he gives his all. I have no worries about that," explained Ramos.

While Real are riding on the crest of a wave city rivals Atletico Madrid are still searching for a first win of the campaign ahead of Sunday's trip to Murcia.

Atletico have invested millions to bring Portuguese international Simao, Spanish winger Jose Antonio Reyes and Uruguayan hotshot Diego Forlan to the capital with Champions League football the target and one point from two games is not the ideal start.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Valencia v Valladolid, Real Madrid v Almeria, Athletic Bilbao v Real Zaragoza

Sunday: Racing Santander v Levante, Murcia v Atletico Madrid, Mallorca v Villarreal, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Betis, Espanyol v Getafe, Sevilla v Recreativo, Osasuna v Barcelona

Papin to end Nancy fairytale

AFP, Paris



French league leaders Nancy will be hoping to continue their fairytale start to the season when they travel to Lens this Saturday for what, on paper at least appears an unlikely high-profile clash.

While six-time defending champions Lyon travel to struggling Metz and desperate Marseille host Toulouse in a must-win encounter at the Velodrome stadium, Nancy's hosting of Lens could be Saturday's biggest draw.

And it's in large part down to former France legend Jean-Pierre Papin.

Papin made his name beating the world's best keepers with 25-yard drives, half-volleys and spectacular scissor kicks in an illustrious career which saw him win the prestigious Ballon d'Or in 1991.

His rise through the coaching ranks

has been relatively rapid, and after leading Strasbourg out of division two last season the Frenchman jumped at the chance to take over the northern strugglers last month.

Followers of France's famous number 17 will be hoping some of his magic can rub off on a club which has inadequate silverware to equal their unfinishing fanatical support.

But at this early stage, the former Marseille and AC Milan marksman has not even considered trying to transform Lens, known affectionately as the 'blood and gold', into French title contenders.

And what Papin has labelled his "real" start to the season, two weeks after taking over from the retired Guy Roux, will be tested to the full by a Nancy team which has won five of their last six games and is the only unbeaten team in the league.

"We have to have difficult matches, against tough opposition if we're going to start off on a positive note," said the

43-year-old Papin, who was part of the France team that finished third in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

"Nancy are among the best teams in the league. They're tough, solid opponents, and they're not in first place by chance.

"We will have to be at our best to win this match."

The season may only be warming up but Marseille can justifiably be envious of Nancy's start to the campaign, which has seen them score a table-topping 13 goals while conceding only four the league's meanest, along with Lens.

Marseille currently sit sixth from bottom with only one win in seven games, and that victory didn't even come at their noisy Velodrome stadium.

Their coach Albert Emon, who in the past has been fired, re-hired and fired again, has vowed that defeat this weekend will lead him to make radical changes.

"It's a crucial match for us

everything we've talked about in the past few weeks must now become reality and I want to see it happen against Toulouse," he said.

"If it doesn't, then a more radical approach will have to be adopted such as sending in players to do the job that isn't being done by the ones already there."

Six times champions Lyon, with four wins and two defeats, appear favourites to take all three points at bottom of the table Metz.

Sunday's big match sees Monaco,

who sit in fourth place three points behind Nancy, host Paris St Germain.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Marseille v Toulouse, Metz v Lyon, Lens v Nancy, Auxerre v Nice, Lille v Bordeaux, Saint-Etienne v Caen, Sochaux v Strasbourg, Le Mans v Valenciennes

Sunday: Monaco v PSG, Lorient v Rennes

C.Ron return adds MU firepower

AFP, London



Cristiano Ronaldo's return for suspension will provide Manchester United with a badly-needed injection of firepower for a testing trip to Everton on Saturday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's champions have started the defence of their Premier League title sluggishly and have found goals hard to come by in the opening month of the season.

But club captain Gary Neville believes that, with Louis Saha having returned from injury with a goal against Sunderland two weeks ago, Ronaldo free to play once more and Wayne Rooney's return imminent, normal service is about to be resumed from the Old Trafford forward ranks.

"Carlos Tevez has been up there on his own. He's come over from the Copa America and been thrown in at the deep end," said Neville, who is nearing his own return from injury but is unlikely to feature at Goodison Park, where Rooney could be on the bench against his former club.

"It's been difficult for us not having three of our forwards available. But you could see in the win

over Sunderland the difference Louis made when he came on, and I think with Wayne coming back soon we'll get even stronger."

Unbeaten Arsenal and Liverpool already have a two-point advantage and a game in hand on United and Neville admitted: "We have to make sure we don't fall too far behind the leaders at this stage.

"Cristiano getting suspended obviously added to our problems but I think it will all come together in the next few weeks."

With only Liverpool and Arsenal ahead of them in the table, Everton have started the season looking the most likely candidate to break into the top four.

But David Moyes's side may have to do without former United goalkeeper Tim Howard, who has been in superb form but dislocated a finger in the United States' friendly defeat by Brazil last weekend.

Liverpool and Arsenal both face testing encounters at the end of a week in which most of their first-team squads have been on international duty.

Arsene Wenger will be hoping to celebrate his new four-million-pound-a-year contract at Arsenal

with victory over Spurs in the north London derby at White Hart Lane.

In contrast, Martin Jol's grip on his job is looking sufficiently tenuous for him to be concerned that a home defeat on Saturday could trigger a dismissal move by a disgruntled board.

It is eight years since Spurs beat their neighbours and Jol knows how much kudos he could gain from delivering a victory this weekend.

"It's not only getting above Arsenal it's beating them," the Dutchman said. "The main thing for us is getting points on the board. We have to change things. We're in a position we don't like and we have to improve on that."

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez will take his squad to Portsmouth and the Spaniard is deeply unhappy that a lunchtime kick-off has squeezed his internationals' recovery time.

The players arrive back on Thursday evening and the only thing you can do with some of them is just to run a little bit and send them home," he said.

"For me it's impossible to prepare the team properly, you can prepare small details but to prepare

FIXTURES

(1400GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday:

Birmingham v Bolton, Chelsea v Blackburn (1615 GMT), Everton v Manchester Utd (1100 GMT), Portsmouth v Liverpool (1145 GMT), Sunderland v Reading (1400 GMT), Tottenham v Arsenal (1230 GMT), West Ham v Middlesbrough, Wigan v Fulham

Sunday:

Manchester City v Aston Villa (1500 GMT)

Monday:

Derby v Newcastle (1900 GMT)

Altintop twins meet head on

AFP, Berlin



There will be no love lost between twin brothers, and best friends, Halil and Hamit Altintop when the Turkish internationals go head-to-head as Bayern Munich face Schalke 04 on Saturday.

Juventus have scored eight goals in their two matches so far against Livorno and Cagliari, and their home match against Udinese on Sunday will give them a chance to add to their tally.

Udinese have yet to win this season though the form of Italy international striker Antonio Di Natale, who scored twice in Wednesday's 2-1 Euro 2008 qualifying victory in Ukraine, will be a plus.

Juventus' French international defender Jonathan Zebina will be sidelined following his four-match suspension for slapping a steward in the face.

Zebina was also fined 15,000