



Argentina sensation Lionel Messi is about to curl a free-kick over the Venezuela wall during their World Cup 2010 qualifying clash at the Pachencio Romero Stadium in Venezuela on Tuesday.

BASILE A HAPPY MAN

Messi delivers again

INTERNET, undated



Argentina coach Alfio Basile admitted his side found it difficult to cope with stifling conditions in Maracaibo but was happy to leave Venezuela with a 2-0 win.

First-half goals from Gabriel Milito and Lionel Messi were enough for the South American giants to secure a second World Cup qualifying victory and maintain a perfect start to their campaign.

The win gave Argentina, who have won all 15 meetings with Venezuela, maximum points from their first two games in the qualifiers for the 2010 World Cup.

Venezuela, the only South American team never to have played at the World Cup, have three points from two games after winning in Ecuador on Saturday.

Messi struck a superb goal two minutes before halftime after his Barcelona teammate Gabriel Milito had given Argentina the lead with his first goal for his country on his 30th appearance.

"It was a very difficult game," Basile said.

"The boys suffered a lot in the heat. We got a good lead in the first half and then tried to conserve energy."

"Venezuela should thank us. We should have scored two or three more."

Venezuela striker Giancarlo

Maldonado wasted an early chance for the hosts when he fired over the crossbar after Juan Arango's incisive pass split the Argentine defence.

Argentina went ahead after three minutes when defender Milito rose to head home Juan Roman Riquelme's free kick.

Riquelme had scored both goals direct from free kicks in Argentina's 2-0 win over Chile on Saturday.

Venezuela enjoyed plenty of possession but could not find the final pass and fell further behind two minutes before halftime.

Carlos Tevez broke down the right and pulled the ball back to the edge of the area where Messi breezed by one defender with his first touch, then unleashed an unstoppable shot past Renny Vega.

Venezuela enjoyed a flourish after the break as Juan Arango broke clear but shot straight at Roberto Abbondanzieri and Maldonado headed over from a corner.

Messi had the ball in the net again in the 65th minute but his effort was ruled out for offside.

As the Venezuelan defence opened up, Esteban Cambiasso hit the post for Argentina 10 minutes from time and debutant striker German Denis, who came on in the 81st minute, missed an easy chance in injury time.

Basile was delighted with the performance of his side and in particular that of Bayern Munich defender Martin Demichelis.

"His (Demichelis) displays have been flawless in both games."

He was practically a wall," he added.

"I'm happy with the performances and the results. We have six points out of six and we were clearly better than both Chile and Venezuela."

Liverpool midfielder Javier Mascherano reiterated his manager's assertion that the side relaxed in the second half.

"We tried to not wear ourselves out too much, we were clever," he said.

"It was very difficult because the pitch was in an awful state and the heat was unbearable."

"But not all teams have Messi, Juan Roman Riquelme and Carlos Tevez. They make the difference."

Manchester United forward Tevez was pleased with the way he and Messi played together.

"I hope that in the future we can link-up even more," he said.

"He is a great player and we combined well with each other right away."

Venezuela keeper Renny Vega admitted he was not surprised by the result.

"We made a few mistakes at the back and a team like Argentina will always take advantage," he said.

"We know that we can write off getting any points against Argentina and Brazil."

"But we will approach the rest of the qualifiers with the intention of gaining a place in the World Cup."

Argentina next host Bolivia at the Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires on November 17, while Venezuela will visit Colombia.

Kanoute's worst experience

AFP, Paris

The Mali international and Seville striker Frederic Kanoute said Tuesday that the recent pitch attack by angry Togo supporters armed with knives was the "worst moment of my life."

Kanoute had stitches in his back after being struck with a belt while teammate Mahamadou Sidibe, who plays for English club Stoke, had surgery for a knife wound to his arm.

The Togo supporters invaded the pitch at the Kérou Stadium in the Togolese capital of Lomé after their side lost 2-0 last Friday in qualifying match for next year's African Nations Cup tournament in Ghana.

"Frankly it was the worst moment of my life," said Kanoute. "I have never known this type of problem on a football field."

"After the match I was sad more than anything else. I couldn't enjoy the victory. It was really really bad."

Kanoute called for the world football governing body, FIFA, to take action over the incident while the Confederation of African Football (CAF) have opened an

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WC 2010 FIFA happy at progress

AFP, Soweto

A senior FIFA official gave his seal of approval Tuesday to South Africa's preparations for the 2010 World Cup, playing down concerns about stadium construction after a recent strike.

"I am satisfied with the general preparations," FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke told AFP.

"We have an attentive ear on the stadium. There are places where we pay more attention on stadium. We have a technical team and a sense of system that allows us to be assured that things will go on as wished," he added.

Valcke's comments come after a recent stoppage by construction workers building the new Green Point stadium in Cape Town, who downed tools for nearly a week in a dispute over travel allowances.

The chairman of FIFA local organising committee, Irvin Khosa, told reporters he was also satisfied that all building work was on schedule to be completed by a FIFA-set 2009 deadline.

"Generally, good progress is being made and the organising committee is confident the 2010 FIFA World Cup construction deadlines will be met," said Khosa.

Khosa meanwhile said around 3,000 people, including FIFA officials and journalists were expected to attend the draw for the World Cup qualifying rounds in the eastern South African city of Durban on November 25.

Ten venues will host the 2010 tournament which will be the first time that the world's most popular sporting event has been staged on African soil.

Berlusconi forgives Dida

Football

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi has admitted that goalkeeper Dida's over-reaction to being struck by a Celtic fan towards the end of the recent Champions League game at Parkhead was a 'mistake'.

UEFA have since banned the Brazilian for two matches for breaching their 'principles of loyalty, integrity and sportsmanship', meaning he will miss back-to-back games against Shakhtar Donetsk.

Berlusconi told www.acmilan.com: "It's hard to understand what goes through the mind of a player when those things happen."

"It can also happen to a great champion, to make a mistake."

The Milan supremo is nevertheless sticking by the Brazil international, with Berlusconi adamant that the Italian club - who lost 2-1 at Celtic - owe him a debt of gratitude for past heroics.

"I consider Dida a great goalkeeper," he continued. "Let's not forget he insisted on playing in Glasgow despite a problem to his shoulder."

"We owe Dida one of our

Champions League victories, the one in 2003 in Manchester against Juventus (which was decided on penalties)."

"It was him against (Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi) Buffon - he made the saves while Buffon didn't. Dida made us win the trophy."

Milan are awaiting a full explanation of the punishment handed down to Dida by UEFA before deciding whether to appeal the ruling.

The Celtic fan who ran onto the field was banned for life by the Scottish champions, who were also fined 12,500 pounds over the incident.

Messi set for bumper deal

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona sports director Txiki Begiristain has revealed the club are in talks with Lionel Messi over reviewing his current contract.

The Argentine wonderkid put pen to paper on a new deal in September 2006, but reports now suggest Barca are willing to improve the terms.

Messi is one of football's most sought-after talents, and the Spanish club are keen to ensure he is happy.

Begiristain dismissed rumours linking the forward with a move away from Frank Rijkaard's side, and explained that he firmly believes Messi deserves an improved contract.

"We are not worried about rumour of offers for the youngster," he explained.

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Del Piero extends with Juve

INTERNET, undated

Juventus forward Alessandro Del Piero has signed a two-year contract extension that will likely see him finish his career at the Turin club.

Del Piero, Juve's all-time leading goalscorer, has been with club for his entire career and is now tied to the Serie A outfit until June 2010.

"I have undertaken a decisive choice in my career and my life," said 32-year-old Del Piero, whose wife is expecting their first child.

"Juventus has given me so much and it is here where I wish to continue to win."

"I share a project which I am confident will help us return to give great satisfaction to our fans."

Juve president Cobolli Gigli admitted to his delight at the deal.

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English fans suffer beating

AFP, Moscow

Five England football fans were hospitalized with minor injuries after being beaten on the streets of Moscow ahead of a tense Euro 2008 qualifying match with Russia, police said Wednesday.

"Five clashes with English supporters were reported during the night," Moscow Deputy Police Chief Yevgeny Gildyev told AFP. "Five Britons were hospitalized with various injuries."

He said police had arrested a 25-year-old Moscow resident suspected in one of the beatings.

A British embassy spokesman, James Barbour, said that only four British nationals had been hospitalized. Two were treated and released and the other two were

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No get-out clause for Owen

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Newcastle United's chairman, Chris Mort, last night said that Michael Owen does not have a 6 million pounds get-out clause in his contract as reports suggested that the Manchester City manager, Sven-Goran Eriksson, was preparing an offer for the striker.

The England player's future at St James' Park has been questioned due to the fact that his advisors negotiated a clause which would have enabled him to leave for 12 million pounds at the end of his first season at St James' Park, and for 9 million pounds at the end of his second after he joined from Real Madrid for 17 million pounds in August 2005.

But Mort said: "There was a clause in Michael's contract which allowed him to leave for a certain fee during the last transfer window and the summer before that as well, but that sort of clause does not exist any longer."

Manchester United's Ryan Giggs has signed a deal that extends his contract until the end of June 2009. The 33-year-old has played 727 matches for the club. Only Sir Bobby Charlton (759) has played more games for United.

"I am delighted to have signed for a further season. I am enjoying football more than ever and I hope to carry on playing football for Manchester United for as long as I can. I would like to thank Sir Alex Ferguson, the fans and everyone at the club for the great support I have received over the years."

Chelsea's midfielder Michael Ballack is still "a few weeks" away from returning to training, according to the German team doctor Hans-Wilhelm Muller-Wohlfahrt.

Ballack has been out of action since April with a persistent ankle problem but Muller-Wohlfahrt said: "In close agreement with the English doctors, I think he will be training again in a few weeks."

Bolton boot out Lee

Football

AFP, London

English Premier League side Bolton on Wednesday announced that coach Sammy Lee was leaving the club after a poor start to the season.

The Lancashire club have taken just five points from their first nine games and only goal difference is keeping them off the bottom of the table.

Lee took over from Sam Allardyce as manager at the Reebok Stadium near the end of last season before Allardyce took over as coach at Newcastle.

General manager Frank McParland has also left the club.

Chairman Phil Gartside told the club's official website, www.boltonfc.co.uk: "This has been a difficult decision for all parties but we have agreed that the time is

right. "Sammy has played an important role in the club's recent history. We wish Sammy and Frank well for the future."

"Our efforts will now be to look for a replacement manager and to concentrate on the future."

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SAMMY LEE

Giggs remains a Red

Football

INTERNET, undated

Ryan Giggs is hopeful his latest Manchester United contract will not be his last.

Only three weeks after Giggs confirmed tentative talks had begun over an extension to his present deal, which was due to expire in the summer, negotiations have reached a successful conclusion.

The long-serving winger's new deal will keep him at Old Trafford until 2009, extending his first-team career with the Red Devils to an incredible 18 years.

Not only does it mean the 33-year-old will get the chance to add yet more medals to a haul that already includes nine Premier League titles, four FA Cups and a Champions League success in 1999, it is now virtually certain he will surpass Sir Bobby Charlton's club appearance record.

Currently 32 adrift of the legendary England World Cup winner, Giggs could even break the record before the current campaign is out should his fitness hold up.

And, if the former Wales skipper continues to feel as good as he does just now, his new contract may not represent the end of his stay at United.

"We said a couple of years ago

that would look at it season-by-season - which is what we have done," Giggs told MUTV.

"I am delighted to get it sorted out. I feel as fit as ever so I hope there will be a couple more."

"A lot has changed over the years but I am enjoying my football more than ever. The nearer you get to the end of your career you want to enjoy it as much as you can."

Only once in all his time at United has Giggs fallen badly out of favour with the Red Devils faithful.

When he was booted during a League Cup semifinal with Blackburn at Old Trafford in January 2003, it appeared his time at United was drawing to an end.

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PHOTO: AFP

Japan defender Yuji Nakazawa (L) heads the ball away from the attentions of Egyptian forward Ahmed Hassan (R) during their friendly match in Osaka on Wednesday. Japan won 4-1.

Rugby England's inspiration

AFP, Moscow



England's football stars have been told to look to the country's rugby heroes for inspiration as they prepare to go into battle with Russia in a crunch Euro 2008 qualifier here on Wednesday.

Steve McClaren's squad have been hit hard by the loss of first choice defenders John Terry and Ashley Cole to injury.

But the head coach believes those losses will not be a problem if the rest of his squad can muster the same spirit and determination shown by rugby's defending world champions in overcoming Australia and France to reach the final of the World Cup.

England will book their place at Euro 2008 if they win on Wednesday and McClaren said: "We need the type of performance the England rugby team has produced over the last two weekends. That is the kind of spirit the English players have."

"The history of English sporting teams and individuals says you should never give up, have a never-say-die spirit."

"When their backs are against the wall, they come out fighting - and they come out on top."

"Despite the criticism or whatever may be thrown at them, they still stand up, are ready to be counted and deliver when necessary."

"That is exactly the same as the last two rugby matches. We have all been inspired by that - myself, my players and my staff. That is what we need."

The combination of the injuries to Terry and Cole, potentially difficult weather conditions and an unfamiliar artificial surface may have made England's task on Wednesday evening slightly more difficult.

But McClaren believes Russia will have a greater burden to cope with simply because Guus Hiddink's men know they are likely to miss out on next year's finals unless they beat a team to whom they lost 3-0 at Wembley last month.

"They have to win," he said. "They have to take risks. They are at home. They have to set the tempo. The first 20 minutes of any game is important. I have always stressed that. I am sure they will be emphasising that."

"We will have to withstand that early storm. We need to get the

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