



Ghana's Asamoah Gyan (R) heads the ball under pressure from Morocco's Abderrahmane Kabous (C) during their African Nations Cup encounter in Accra on Monday.

Ghana KO Morocco

AFP, Accra



Premiership duo Michael Essien and Sulley Muntari helped Ghana qualify for the African Nations Cup quarterfinals, but while the hosts march on it's the end of the road for Morocco. The Black Stars, in their best performance since battle commenced for the continental crown, were far too slick for the 2004 runners-up, with first half goals from Essien and Muntari silencing the Atlas Lions' roar 2-0 here Monday.

Over in Sekondi, Guinea, missing skipper Pascal Feindouno, carved out a 1-1 draw with Namibia to secure their passage to the last eight as Group A runners-up.

Ghana had come in for heavy criticism by the local press and fans after two far from top notch performances in their victories over Guinea and Namibia.

Yet here they put those stuttering displays behind them to turn on the style in front of a near capacity crowd at the 45,000 seater Ohene Djan Stadium.

Claude Le Roy, who won the title with Cameroon in 1988, said he wanted to thank his players.

"That was his best performance since I took over as Ghana manager. My players applied perfectly the way we'd decided to play. They were so dedicated, played so well, it was perfect. We've worked a lot on tactics in

the last few days, and I organised things differently, giving Michael (Essien) more space in midfield." The tinkerer paid off handsomely, with Essien conducting affairs in his usual assured manner in midfield.

Ghana went into a deserved lead on 26 minutes when Muntari neatly chipped in a freekick over the wall from the right for Essien to volley past Nadir Lamyaghri keeping goal for Morocco.

And the Cup hosts capped a fine first half with their second goal, with this time Essien charging through midfielder to flick the ball on for Muntari to shoot from the left of the box on 45 minutes.

Essien, after picking up his third consecutive man of the match award, said: "That was the best performance in this competition. For me I just want to do the best for my team, for my friends. Hopefully we can achieve something for the nation."

Le Roy added that it would have been hard for any side to live with Ghana playing like they did. "My players were so concentrated today any team would have struggled."

For Morocco captain Amin al-Erbate it was time to move on after the country's second consecutive first round exit.

"We've got to forget this tournament and think of the future. We've got to look at the mistakes we made even if we'd won today we didn't deserve to qualify after we slipped up against Guinea."

"It was hard playing Ghana in front of their own public," the United Arab Emirates-based player added.

Morocco coach Henri Michel said he had no intention of stand-

ing down. "I only arrived a short time ago. We've got to look to the future." He intimated that there would likely be wholesale changes in the squad ahead of qualifying for the 2010 World Cup.

Guinea, after losing their opening game against Ghana, booked their quarterfinal ticket with that win over Morocco and Monday's 1-1 draw with Namibia.

Naby Soumah opened the scoring for Guinea in the 62nd minute when he fired past Namibia goal tender Athiel Mbaha from inside the box but Namibia drew level in the 81st minute through a low shot from outside the area by Brian Blendel.

"It was good to qualify for the quarterfinal but we did not play well and we conceded a goal," said Guinea's Celtic defender Bobo Balde. "We missed Pascal (Feindouno) and we were a little bit tired."

"We have to play far better if we want to progress further in this tournament."

Guinea's French coach Robert Nouzzaret commented: "We were patient, we opened the scoring, and we again didn't control the game well towards the end."

Guinea will have to do without the services of Feindouno again in their quarterfinal, but Youla insisted: "We can also play without him!"

Ghana and Guinea will find out who their last eight rivals are after Tuesday's final batch of Group B games with already qualified Ivory Coast up against Mali, who only need a draw.

Nigeria face Benin in Sekondi in the group's second game.

Scholes set for return

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson believes experienced midfielder Paul Scholes could play an important part in Manchester United's bid this season to match their treble achievement of 1999.

The 33-year-old former England midfielder is expected to feature in Wednesday's league match at home to Portsmouth after ending three months out following a knee operation with a substitute appearance in last weekend's 3-1 FA Cup victory over Tottenham Hotspur.

"Something special seems to happen when the ball goes to him. He has an innate sense of compo-

sure about him," said United boss Ferguson. "The game just seems to stop so he controls it. He is an amazing player.

Scholes underwent an operation to repair his cartilage in October after pulling up before the Champions League match against Dynamo Kiev.

United, top of the Premier League on goal difference from Arsenal - who they will face in the last 16 of the FA Cup next month following Monday's draw - are currently in with a chance of winning their domestic title, the FA Cup and the Champions League where their next opponents are French club Lyon.

"It is an improbable goal but we would like to prove otherwise," said Ferguson of the treble.

"People have said what happened in 1999 will never be done

again but we will go for it.

"We are in the next round of the FA Cup, we have two games to come against Lyon and we are top of the Premier League. We are trying our best."

Portsmouth, ninth in the table and with one of the best away records in the league, could give a debut to new loan signing Milan Baros.

The Lyon striker, who has played in England for Liverpool and Aston Villa, could prove an important transfer window addition to the Pompey squad which is currently depleted by the loss of forwards Kanu and John Utaka to the ongoing Africa Nations Cup.

"It is a tough game to begin with and United are the favourites but if we go there and fight we can get a result because I know the players here and they have some top quality," said Baros.

Wednesday sees Chelsea, looking to maintain the pressure on the top two, at home to Reading.

Basement side Derby, in their first match since the takeover of the club by US-based investors, are at home to Manchester City with both sides looking to recover from FA Cup exits against lower league opponents.

West Ham are at home to Liverpool in the visitors' first match since the embarrassment of conceding two goals to non-league Havant and Watford while Everton, currently in the top four, welcome Tottenham to Goodison Park.

FIXTURES (1945 GMT unless stated)

Wednesday: Chelsea v Reading, Derby v Manchester City, Everton v Tottenham (2000 GMT), Manchester United v Portsmouth (2000 GMT), West Ham v Liverpool

Wenger slates Saudi trip

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger has resumed hostilities with his old adversary Sir Alex Ferguson by warning Manchester United that they could pay a high price for last week's money-spinning trip to Saudi Arabia.

United looked jaded on their return from what was a 6,000-mile round trip and, although that did not prevent them from beating Tottenham 3-1 in the FA Cup on Sunday, Wenger publicly questioned the wisdom of the mid-season jaunt, said to have resulted in one million pounds flowing into the Old Trafford coffers.

"I have never done it and I am not a fanatic about it," the Frenchman said in comments that are unlikely to be appreciated by his opposite number at United.

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Maradona visits Chelsea

Football

AFP, London

Diego Maradona has fired up Chelsea going into Wednesday's clash with Reading at Stamford Bridge - the Hand of God intervening to make the visitors' trip even more daunting.

Maradona, who knows Chelsea manager Avram Grant of old, stunned the Blues players by turning up to watch training at the west London club's Cobham complex on Monday.

And though the 47-year-old did not take part, the former Argentina striker who has been troubled by drugs misuse and other health problems, buoyed the English Premier League title chasers as they prepared to tackle the Royals.

"He is a legend, a hero for everyone, and a fantastic player." Blues

striker Andriy Shevchenko told the club's website, after he and midfielder Michael Ballack returned to training.

"He has had a difficult life, but he is doing well now. He looks good; he has lost a lot of weight, and feels much better. He plays so freely me, but I can't play much right now. Now I start to train and feel good."

Maradona watched on as Petr Cech lost a "crossbar challenge" game before the goalkeeper to return to the changing rooms in just his gloves and underpants as a forfeit.

The Blues are third in the Premier League table, four points behind leaders Manchester United and Arsenal. Reading, meanwhile, are 14th, two points above the relegation zone.

The training ground arrivals at Chelsea and Reading summed up the gulf between the Blues and Royals.

While the man often considered

the game's greatest player rolled into Cobham, at Hogwood Park, Reading boss Steve Coppell unveiled new signing Jimmy Kebe, whom he has seen on video and said needs to improve.

The Mali winger was bought from French Ligue One strugglers Lens, and has been grafting away on loan at Ligue Two side Boulogne.

"Our scouts' reports were all positive but he is not the finished article. He is going to need work and have to adjust to the English style of football," said Coppell, who bought the 24-year-old for an undisclosed fee.

"I haven't seen him live, although I have seen tapes. We have had right-side problems and he can play right or left."

"He has pace, which I always like, and it was an opportunity to bring another player in."

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Gyan's home under watch

AFP, Accra

Ghana striker Asamoah Gyan's family home in Accra is under police surveillance following death threats made by fans after the Udiense star's below par performance against Namibia.

The police protection was set up after the 22-year-old threatened to quit the African Nations Cup at the weekend in protest at the treatment meted out to him by the fans and media.

Gyan's mother, Cecilia Love Amoako, issued a plea to his detractors, telling them to lay off her son, whose elder brother Baffour is also in Claude Le Roy's squad.

"Ghanaians are ungrateful. My son is only 22 but has done something good for the nation, so he should not be treated this way," she said in an interview with Graphic Sports newspaper on Tuesday.

"In Ghana, before a player stops playing for the nation, Ghanaians will destroy him," the headmistress of a school in Accra warned.

She told the paper the decision to put the family home under police protection came after a crisis meeting on Saturday night between the Gyan brothers, their parents, and Ghana's Sports Minister Dominic Fohih.

Gyan's teammate Michael Essien has also hit out at the taunts received by his teammate.

"It's really unfair to criticise and go against Asamoah," said the Chelsea midfielder who played a starring role in Monday's win.

"Okay he missed chances against Namibia, but everyone has to get behind him."

"It's not good to insult him, he's a young lad coming up and doing well for his team."

"The fans shouldn't insult us; we only want to do the best for our country. Hopefully we can achieve something for the nation."

Gyan put in a far more polished display in Ghana's 2-0 win over Morocco on Monday, a result that put them into the quarterfinals.

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Teammates back Gilardino

AFP, Rome



AC Milan players have rallied behind teammate Alberto Gilardino ahead of Wednesday's trip to lowly Reggina.

Gilardino looked a disconsolate figure on Sunday when he spent the entire match against Genoa on the bench, even suffering the ignominy of stripping off and waiting

on the touchline only to be told at the last moment that Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti had changed his mind and would not be introducing him to the fray.

A lot has been made of Gilardino's dissatisfaction in the Italian press with some suggesting his days at Milan are numbered.

But his teammates have jumped to his defence, including injured forward Filippo Inzaghi, who himself has often faced long spells on the bench.

"I would advise Gilardino to

stay, he knows what I think," Pippo told Sky Sport. "He and I are great friends, also off the pitch."

"He and Pato are the future of Milan and they will make us dream. Sometimes you have to have hard times, I had them too when I was at Juventus."

"Despite scoring in one match I could find myself on the bench the next game."

"He has to believe in his potential and know that everyone wants him to succeed."

"No one is happy sitting on the bench, it's normal to feel angry, but always in the right way."

"He has played his part, he has the numbers (good goal-scoring record), he doesn't have anything to prove to anyone, he should stay and I'm sure he will."

Gilardino came off the bench 10 days ago to score a vital injury-time winner against Udinese and followed that up a week ago by starting against Atalanta.

But he failed to shine and did not even get off the bench against Genoa.

One reason for that is the fine form of new teenage striker Pato, who has bagged three goals in his first four games for the club, including both goals in the 2-0 win over Genoa on Sunday.

He is likely to get the nod again on Wednesday as Milan try to take another step closer to their ultimate goal of finishing fourth by winning one of their two remaining games in hand.

They will have to do so without Brazilian forward Ronaldo once again as he is still suffering from a muscle problem in his leg, his third different leg injury this season.

"At this moment in time, if I can I will try to be ready for the match next weekend against Fiorentina," said 'Il Fenomeno'.

"I hope this will be the case because in this period we have many important matches and Milan needs everyone and I want to be ready to play."

Ronaldo also had some words of encouragement for Gilardino.

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Juve complete Sissoko signing

REUTERS, Milan

Juventus have signed Liverpool midfielder Mohamed Sissoko for 11 million euros (\$16.26 million), the Serie A club said on Tuesday.

The Mali midfielder jetted to Italy at the weekend for a medical before heading back to the African Nations Cup in Ghana, where his side face Ivory Coast later on Tuesday.

Sissoko, who went to Anfield in 2005 but fell out of favour following the arrival of Javier Mascherano, has signed a five-year contract with the Turin club, a statement said.

The former Valencia player replaces Argentine Sergio Almiron, who was sent on loan to Monaco after an ineffective first few months at Juve, having signed from Empoli in the close season.

If Mali reach the African Nations Cup final on Feb. 10, Juve could be without their new signing until mid-February.

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Rijkaard not giving up yet

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard said Monday he has no intention of conceding the Spanish title to Real Madrid, even though his team are nine points adrift of the leaders.

"Real Madrid is the best team in the League, they don't drop points. But we cannot give up the title, we must continue to work and put our hearts into it," the Dutchman told a news conference. "We will not give up anything."

Real Madrid beat Villarreal 3-2 on Sunday, their eighth consecutive win for the team which has not dropped a single point at home this season.

With Barcelona's 1-1 draw at Athletic Bilbao, the League champions are now nine points clear of their rivals.

The Catalan team plays Glasgow Celtic next month in the last 16 of the Champions League and faces Villarreal in the quarterfinals second leg of the Spanish Cup on Thursday.



Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova addresses a press conference in Tel Aviv on Tuesday. Australian Open champion Sharapova has committed herself to making a belated Fed Cup debut for Russia against Israel next weekend.

PHOTO: AFP



Barcelona star Ronaldinho (R) is greeted by teammate Messi after returning to the team's training session in Barcelona on Tuesday. Ronaldinho has not played in 2008 due to tendonitis in the knee.

PHOTO: AFP