



Brazil midfielder Diego (2nd from R) falls under the challenge from Bolivia's Garcia Justino (2nd from L) during their 2010 World Cup qualifier in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday. Brazil were disappointing in their 0-0 draw against Bolivia.

Superstition paved the way

THE GUARDIAN

Theo Walcott contemplated changing his boots at half-time last night, one of the studs having disintegrated during the first period, only for superstition to get the better of him. "There was no way I was going to change them," he said, and the pair that had yielded his first goal at this level duly helped him to become England's youngest ever hat-trick scorer. "The stud had basically just fallen to pieces. That's why I finished the third goal with my left."

This will be a night that will stay with the youngster forever. His father witnessed him run riot in person, sitting incredulous and yelling with pride in the stands. The winger might have expected a bit-part role in Fabio Capello's first competitive fixtures but he returns to Arsenal with his reputation as his country's brightest young prospect re-established.

Capello and England expect more to come from this talent. This was the first competitive hat-trick by an England player since Michael Owen in Munich seven years ago. The implications for the Newcastle striker, not deemed fit enough to be in this squad, may be far-reaching, although Walcott conceded he has plenty still to learn.

"I've got to take my chances. I tend to cross when I get into those situations, which I did when Frank [Lampard] played a great ball to me in the first half when I should have shot. At half-time David Beckham said to me, 'Be a bit more greedy and you'll get goals', but at the end he said maybe I'd been a bit too greedy. He's been absolutely brilliant to me, which is great."

Toni slams press

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni has slammed the press in his native Italy for consistently criticising him since he joined the German giants last year.

The 2006 World Cup winner claims he has been given a rough ride by the Italian media since Fiorentina sold him to Bayern for 11 million euros (15 million US dollars) in the summer of 2007.

Despite scoring 24 goals in 31 Bundesliga matches last season, Toni played poorly for Italy during last June's Euro 2008 tournament where the world champions were beaten by Spain in the semi-finals.

"If the Italian national team wins, Toni played badly. If Italy loses, it is Toni's fault," the striker moaned to German agency SID after Italy's 2-0 win over Georgia in Udine, Italy, on Wednesday night in a World Cup qualifier.

"Italy were knocked out of the European Championship and Toni is responsible for it."

"Basically, I am fed up with it!" The 31-year-old failed to score and was replaced after 71 minutes against Georgia as Daniele De Rossi scored either side of half-time.

"Since I moved to play abroad, I have been attacked again and again. I find it unfair," added Toni.

"It is not easy to have the media and people against you."

"Against Georgia, I played the way coach Marcello Lippi wanted."

"I am happy with my performance. The truth is I would be treated better if I played for AC Milan or Juventus, I am convinced of that."

Struggle for giants

INTERNET, undated

South American football giants Brazil and Argentina were held to unlikely draws against lowly rivals in the 2010 World Cup.

Brazil could do no better Wednesday night than a goalless draw against lowly, 10-man Bolivia in Rio de Janeiro while Argentina scored a promising goal just eight minutes before the end of the game in Lima only to have Peru equalize 1-1 in the last seconds of injury time.

In earlier games, Chile thrashed Colombia 4-0 in Santiago to overtake both Colombia and Uruguay in the standings while Ecuador consolidated their recovery with a valuable goalless draw against Uruguay in Montevideo.

After Wednesday's contests, Paraguay's 2-0 win against Venezuela Tuesday in Asuncion became particularly valuable. After eight rounds of qualifiers, Paraguay was at the top of the standings at 17 points with Brazil, Argentina and Chile tied at 13 and Uruguay following with 12 points.

Brazil again showed their poorest

form Wednesday, three days after a comfortable, 3-0 win over Chile in Santiago had given coach Carlos Dunga much-needed relief from withering criticism.

At the Engenhao stadium, an orderly, defensive Bolivia had Ignacio Garcia sent off in the 53rd minute for a foul on Robinho. Even Brazilian television commentators thought the red card was harsh, but Bolivia still managed to keep the game scoreless.

The team around Ronaldinho and Robinho lacked creativity and was humiliated on home turf by Bolivia, who remain last in the South American qualifiers despite the draw.

Brazilian fans shouted insults, calling Dunga "burro," or "donkey," and saying, "adeus," or "goodbye," in a call for his resignation or sacking.

"Booing is natural when the team does not play well and fails to win," Dunga said. "We have put on a good performance against Chile, and everyone was expecting us to repeat it today. That was the fans' way to protest."

Brazilian players agreed with their coach, and keeper Julio Cesar conceded failure in the match.

"We played badly," he said. "We had an extra player, and we were unable to make the most of that advantage."

Bolivian coach Erwin Sanchez was exultant over the unlikely result, and said "Bolivia was perfect."

For the fifth consecutive round in the qualifiers, Argentina failed to obtain a win Wednesday.

In a game in which Peru invested tough work and Argentina's stars failed to shine, Esteban Cambiasso put the visitors ahead eight minutes from the end. The Inter Milan midfielder barely had to push in a low cross from Fernando Gago.

The goal appeared set to cover up the poor performance of the men led by Alfio Basile with a lacklustre Lionel Messi and Sergio Aguero very much alone in front.

However, in the very last ball played in the game, well into injury time, Johan Fano scored what seemed to be a well-deserved point for Peru.

Fano's goal was similar to Cambiasso's, as he brought home a cross from Juan Vargas from the left.

"We did not play our best game," Argentine defender Martin Demichelis admitted. "It got terribly complicated."

Peru's Vargas expressed a widespread opinion that "Argentina would not have deserved a win."

'For my father-in-law'

Football

INTERNET, undated

Italy hero Daniele De Rossi paid an emotional tribute to his late father-in-law after the Azzurri's 2-0 win over Georgia.

De Rossi scored both goals in the Italians' second straight World Cup qualifying victory.

Massimo Pissoli, De Rossi's father-in-law, was murdered last month in Rome and the Roma midfielder said: "I dedicate this victory to my father-in-law: a man who we all loved and who is no longer with us."

"It's a difficult time for me but no-one can imagine what my wife and her sisters of 14 and 17 have gone through."

Italy coach Marcello Lippi had nothing but praise for the 25-year-old.

"He is one of the best midfielders in the world," said Lippi. "He is at the level of (Frank) Lampard and (Steven) Gerrard."

De Rossi was touched by Lippi's remarks, saying: "I work hard to become always a stronger player even at international level."

"Lippi's remarks give me great pleasure because to be considered alongside a fantastic player like Gerrard is a great compliment."

Lippi was also satisfied with his team's overall improvement.

The Azzurri tactician admitted his team had been fortunate to have taken a 2-1 triumph at Cyprus last weekend after Antonio Di Natale's last-minute goal.

"We have suffered to get this victory against Georgia," said Lippi. "But it's beautiful to win having suffered."

"I have seen some improvement and this is a good sign."

"Considering the many players we have lost to injuries in recent days, to have come out with two positive results is very good."

"In a month's time we will be in a different situation, with players already having six or seven games under their belts."



Italy midfielder Daniele De Rossi celebrates after scoring against Georgia during their 2010 World Cup qualifying match in Udine on Wednesday. De Rossi scored a brace as Italy defeated Georgia 2-0.

ENGLAND SIZZLE, GERMANY FIZZLE Relief for France, Italy

AFP, Paris



Hat-tricks by Theo Walcott and Miroslav Klose saw England to a crushing 4-1 win over Croatia and Germany a face saving 3-3 draw with Finland respectively in Wednesday's second batch of European qualifiers for the 2010 World Cup.

Walcott at last showed the talent that had provoked Sven-Goran Eriksson to take him to the 2006 finals but failed to get a game - however his vibrant display may well usher in the end of former captain David Beckham's international career.

For Klose it was a perfect response to those who believed he may be past his prime as three times he levelled for the 2006 semi-finalists against a Finnish side hardly brimming with world class talent.

There was relief too for France coach Raymond Domenech, who may well have faced the axe had his side gone down to defeat at home to Serbia, but second-half goals by former Arsenal teammates Thierry Henry and Nicolas Anelka were enough to see them to a 2-1 win.

Italy, the side that denied Domenech the World Cup last time round, also won as a brace from Daniele De Rossi saw them to a 2-0 win over Georgia and give them six points from their first two matches.

The Republic of Ireland, coached by former Italy handler Giovanni Trapattoni, eked out a 0-0 draw away at Montenegro to trail the Italians by two points.

There were mixed results for the

Iberian duo as European champions Spain breezed past Armenia 4-0 while 2006 World Cup semi-finalists Portugal lost 3-2 at home to Denmark, conceding two goals in injury-time.

That was not quite such an embarrassment as Switzerland losing 2-1 at home to Luxembourg, one that must rate as probably the worst in the distinguished career of Swiss boss Ottmar Hitzfeld.

For England the victory was a measure of revenge for the two Euro 2008 qualifier defeats inflicted by the Croats which had seen the Balkan side progress to the finals at the expense of the English.

Walcott was modesty itself after firing his hat-trick against a Croatian side - reduced to 10-men early in the second-half when Robert Kovac was red carded - that suffered its first ever competitive home defeat in Zagreb.

"There were 11 stars, the whole team were stars out there," said the teenager.

England coach Fabio Capello praised Walcott's performance but also cautioned against expecting a similar level of performance the whole time.

"I said after Andorra that he can play fantastic but he will play not the same level all the games. He is very interesting, very young but we have to help him," said the Italian.

German coach Joachim Loew admitted conceding three goals was not wholly satisfactory but he was delighted in Klose, as the 30-year-old took his international tally to 44 goals in 84 games - leaving him just four away from becoming Germany's third-highest goalscorer.

"We know what Miro Klose can do, sometimes in life having a bit of

trust pays off," said Loew.

"We showed a lot of character to come from behind three times."

However, they will have to sharpen up considerably with Euro 2008 semi-finalists Russia in their group, as they opened their campaign with a 2-1 win over Wales.

Domenech had remarked on Tuesday that it was just as well that the guillotine was not in use any more given the criticism he had come under since the opening 3-1 defeat by Austria.

The enigmatic coach looked relieved as the final whistle went - better than the whistles that had greeted him prior to the match from the home crowd, increasingly fed up with a series of poor performances and results.

"The players reacted well to the challenge set for them," admitted the 56-year-old.

"The quality of football was there and looks promising for the future."

"I think the players and the spectators tonight had a good rapport," added Domenech, none too convincingly.

Italy's De Rossi has been more renowned for his combative qualities rather than his goalscoring prowess but he may have changed the common perception of him on Wednesday with his brace, the first a rip-snorter from 30 yards.

It left Italy coach Marcello Lippi more than satisfied.

"It's good enough. We've got six points, the players did well," said Lippi.

"We finished with two good results and now we can go home and get five or six more games under our belts before the next matches," he added.

WC 2010 Qualifying Results

EUROPEAN ZONE

Group 1
At Stockholm
Sweden 2 (Kallstrom 55, Holmen 64)
Hungary 1 (Rudolf 90+3)
At Tirana
Albania 3 (Bogdani 45+1, Duro 83, Daliku 90)
Malta 0
At Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Nani 42, Deco 86-pen)
Denmark 3 (Bendtner 84, Poulsen 90, D. Jensen 90+2)

Group 2
At Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Picusciac 1) Israel 2 (Golan 40, Saban 45)
At Riga
Latvia 0 Greece 2 (Gekas 17, 50)
At Zurich
Switzerland 1 (Nkufo 43) Luxembourg (Strasser 28, Leweck 86)

Group 3
At Serravalle
San Marino 0 Poland 2 (Smolarek 35, Lewandowski 68)
At Manjbor
Slovenia 2 (Novakovic 22, 82) Slovakia 1 (Jakubko 83)
At Belfast
Northern Ireland 0 Czech Republic 0

Group 4
At Moscow
Russia 2 (Pavlyuchenko 22-pen, Pogrebnyak 81) Wales 1 (Ledley 67)
At Baku
Azerbaijan 0 Liechtenstein 0
At Helsinki
Finland 3 (Johansson 33, Vayrynen 43, Juloud 53) Germany 3 (Klose 38, 45, 83)

Group 5
At Istanbul
Turkey 1 (Emre 74-pen) Belgium 1 (Sonck 31)
At Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Bosnia-Herzegovina 3 (Misimovic 25, 30-pen, 56, Muslimovic 58, Dzeko 60, 73, Ibricic 88) Estonia 0
At Alcabete, Spain
Spain 4 (Capdevila 7, Villa 16, 79, Marcos Senna 83) Armenia 0

Group 6
At Almaty
Kazakhstan 1 (Ostapenko 65) Ukraine 3 (Nazarenko 45, 80, Shevchenko 52)
At Andorra-La-Vieille
Andorra 1 (Pujol 66-pen) Belarus 3 (Verkhovstov 36, Rodionov 78, Hleb 89)
At Zagreb
Croatia 1 (Mandzukic 78) England 4 (Walcott 26, 59, 82, Rooney 63)

Group 7
At Torshavn
Faroe Isles 0 Romania 1 (Cocis 59)
At Marijampole, Lithuania
Lithuania 2 (Danilevicius 52, 58) Austria 0
At Paris
France 2 (Henry 55, Anelka 63) Serbia 1 (Ivanovic 77)

Group 8
At Podgorica
Montenegro 0 Republic of Ireland 0
At Udine, Italy
Italy 2 (De Rossi 17, 89) Georgia 0

Group 9
At Skopje
Macedonia 1 (Pandev 78-pen) The Netherlands 2 (Heitinga 46, van der Vaart 60)
At Reykjavik
Iceland 1 (Gudjohnsen 77-pen) Scotland 2 (Broadfoot 18, Robson 59)

ASIAN ZONE
Group 1
At Doha
Qatar 1 (Sebastien Quintana 5) Bahrain 1 (Abdulla Baba Fadadi 67)
At Tashkent
Uzbekistan 0 Australia 1 (Chipperfield 26)

Group 2
At Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 1 (Subait Khater 23) Saudi Arabia 2 (Abdoh Autef 68, Ahmed Al Fraidi 72)
At Shanghai
North Korea 1 (Hong Yong-Jo 63) South Korea 1 (Ki Sung-Yeung 68)

SOUTH AMERICAN ZONE
Peru 1 (Fano 90+3) Argentina 1 (Cambiasso 82)
Chile 4 (Jara 26, Sotelo 38, Fuentes 48, Fernandez 71) Colombia 0
Uruguay 0 Ecuador 0
Brazil 0 Bolivia 0



Germany striker Miroslav Klose (C) scores his second goal against Finland during their 2010 World Cup qualifier at the Olympic Stadium in Helsinki on Wednesday. Klose scored a hat-trick to save Germany's blushes in a 3-3 draw against Finland.

Favourites march on

AFP, Chicago



The United States, Mexico and Costa Rica remained unbeaten in the semi-final phase of regional World Cup qualifying Wednesday, continuing their march toward South Africa 2010.

The United States stretched their lead atop Group 1 with a 3-0 victory over Trinidad and Tobago.

Mexico, bidding farewell to striker Cuauhtemoc Blanco, downed Canada 2-1 in Tuxtla Gutierrez to consolidate their position atop Group 2, while Group 3 leaders Costa Rica beat hosts Haiti 3-1 in Port-au-Prince.

The United States, which opened the semi-final phase with away victories over Guatemala and Cuba, won their first home fixture thanks to goals from Michael Bradley, Clint Dempsey and Brian Ching.

The United States have yet to

surrender a goal, and with nine points from three matches are virtually assured of reaching the final "hexagonal" phase of qualifying.

They pulled five points clear of Trinidad and Tobago and Guatemala in Group 1.

Guatemala joined Trinidad and four points with a 4-1 win over Cuban in Guatemala City.

Roberto Linares put Cuba ahead in the 24th minute, but Guatemala top scorer Carlos Ruiz nabbed a brace of goals in the 37th and 54th. Mario Rodriguez (87) and Jorge Contreras (90) added one apiece to complete the scoring.

The top two teams in each of the three groups advance to the final phase. From there, three teams advance to the finals in South Africa, while the fourth-placed finishers play off for a berth against a team from South America.

Bradley and Dempsey got the USA off to a quick start.

Bradley struck first, firing home a free kick lofted from the left by

Landon Donovan in the ninth minute.

Nine minutes later, Dempsey made it 2-0 with a powerful right-footed shot into the left side of the net.

Ching added a header in the 57th to round off the scoring for the United States.

In Tuxtla Gutierrez, Mexico received a needed spark from super-sub Omar Bravo, who had been on the pitch just six minutes when he fired a header past Lars Hirschfeld in the 58th minute.

Rafael Marquez made it 2-0 for Mexico in the 72nd, and Canadian Ali Gerba's 77th minute goal wasn't enough to prevent Mexico from remaining perfect with nine points from three matches in Group 2.

Blanco came on for Mexico in the waning moments. He had announced before the match that it would be his last appearance for the national team, and was honoured with a tribute from team captain Marquez.

Zola set for Hammers

INTERNET, undated



Gianfranco Zola will fly to London today to start his new life as manager of West Ham.

The 42-year-old has agreed a three-year deal to succeed Alan Curbishley and he is due at Upton Park today to sign his contract.

The club will announce his backroom staff today and it can be revealed that caretaker boss Kevin Keen will continue on the coaching staff - but ex-Hammers striker Paolo Di Canio is not part of Zola's plans.

Steve Clarke, the Scot who is currently assistant to Luiz Felipe Scolari at Chelsea, has been linked with a move to becoming Zola's assistant manager - they know each other well from Zola's time there.

So too has Pierluigi Casiraghi, with whom Zola worked with

Italy's Under-21 side, but he has cast doubt on that saying: "If Gianfranco decides to go to England, I will lose a great coach and more importantly, a true friend. But I don't want to leave this national team."

Businessman Kia Joorabchian, who acts as transfer consultant for the Hammers, revealed Clarke is the preferred assistant manager for Zola.

"They are looking for assistants," he told Sky Sports.

"Gianfranco has a very close relationship with one particular person, Steve Clarke. They are very close and they feel his experience in the Premier League, working under very big coaches at Chelsea, has given him a lot of experience."

"He is more defensively-minded than Gianfranco so he brings good balance. I think that is what he is going for."

Asked whether Zola's appointment was nearly a done deal, the businessman said: "Yes. Pretty much all the i's and t's have been dotted and crossed."

"I think tomorrow he will sign and be the new West Ham manager."

Graeme Le Saux, a teammate of Zola's at Chelsea, believes West Ham have landed a great signing.

Le Saux said: "West Ham have pulled off a major coup. It's been a bit of an unsettled time for the club but every one of that squad will be excited. They will be squaring forward to that first training session."

Zola has already revealed he is committed to a philosophy which will excite the Hammers fans.

He said: "I only know one way to play: on the floor, attacking football, the way things should be done. I want to excite people, that is why we play isn't it?"