



Italian debutant Giampaolo Pazzini (L) stoops low to score past the Montenegro goalkeeper during their World Cup qualifying match at Podgorica on Wednesday.

## Iran sack Daei

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Sunday sacked its national football team coach Ali Daei following its defeat against Saudi Arabia in a 2010 World Cup qualifier, the state news agency IRNA reported on Sunday.

"Ali Daei was sacked from coaching the national team in response to people's demands for his negligence in fulfilling his duty and the team's poor results in World Cup qualifiers," IRNA said, quoting an unnamed source.

The announcement of Daei's dismissal who is the world record-holder scorer in international matches, came after his lacklustre performances as coach for the 2010 World Cup Asia's qualifiers.

Iran, seeking a fourth appearance in the finals, are fourth in Group B with six points from five games managing only a win and three consecutive draws.

Daei's dismissal became imminent after the national team's 2-1 defeat in a home game against Saudi Arabia in front of almost 100,000 enthusiastic fans on Saturday.

Daei reacted angrily when local reporters on Saturday questioned whether he would resign after his poor performance to date as Iranian coach.

The former star was appointed to lead the national team in March 2008 after a months-long search for a new coach which also saw a dozen top foreign names mooted.

Daei, whose career included spells at Bayern Munich and Hertha Berlin, was unquestionably Iran's most famous footballer ever.

## Formula 1 Brawn 1-2 in Melbourne

AFP, Melbourne

Britain's Jenson Button led home a sensational one-two finish for Brawn GP in its debut Formula One team start at the twilight Australian Grand Prix here on Sunday.

Button rocketed away from the pole to lead throughout the 58 laps of the season-opener and kept clear of the mayhem behind him to cruise home in a safety car finish for his second victory in 154 GPs.

The 29-year-old Briton, who led by as much as 34secs at one stage, had 0.807seconds to spare in beating his teammate Rubens Barrichello.

Italian Jarno Trulli in a Toyota crossed the line in third, but was stripped of the position by race stewards, leaving world champion Lewis Hamilton in a McLaren-Mercedes another 1.3secs away in third.

It was the first time since 1954 when five-time world champion Juan Manuel Fangio led home Karl Kling for Mercedes in the French Grand Prix that a debut team had finished one-two in a race.

It also was the first time a new team has won its debut Grand Prix since Jody Scheckter's victory for Wolf in the season-opening race of 1977 in Argentina.

It was a remarkable first race of the season for the Brawn newcomers, who only came into existence on March 6 in the wake of a management buyout of Honda, which quit

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## Small is beautiful

IHT, London



Small is sometimes monumental in the world of soccer.

On Sunday, people were waking up on all continents to the rhythms of the World Cup whose first finals in Africa are just over a year away, in South Africa in 2010.

From Buenos Aires, we could view the real start of the Diego Maradona era as national team coach. The cameras were trained on Maradona as he went through the emotions from tension to joy to working the crowd during Argentina's emphatic 4-0 World Cup qualifying victory over Venezuela.

Argentina is heading for the finals, Venezuela will probably miss out, yet again. But it was nevertheless compelling because Maradona chose attackers in his own image: Lionel Messi, Sergio Agüero and Carlos Tévez each of them shoulder high to the average international player. All three scored. And all three were hugged and kissed by the similarly small Maradona.

All this before 50,000 people in a stadium called El Monumental.

"I am happy, very happy," declared the coach who once

trod this turf as the greatest player of his time. "Reality is even better than fiction."

Nowhere could have been more emotive on Saturday than Buenos Aires this weekend. The Monumental, the home of River Plate, is a place where you can sense the past all around you.

Pity the Venezuelans who stepped into this cauldron Saturday without a victory ever against Argentina. The pre-match pageantry was of course focused on Diego Armando Maradona, the extraordinary Argentine who had led his country to win the 1986 World Cup and who is charged with emulating Germany's Franz Beckenbauer by winning the trophy as player, then as coach.

If Maradona does that it will be even more remarkable. Five years ago, he almost died of drug induced-heart failure. Now he is portly again, and has regained that strutting demeanor of a man willing to take on the world.

He knows that his popularity in Argentina is on the line. He knows many of his countrymen want Juan Riquelme as playmaker. Riquelme quit the national team after Maradona failed to pick him for two friendly matches in Europe.

Maradona shrugs, and picks a side full of attackers, short on defense, and shorter still on midfield composure.

Before the national

anthems, the latest edition to his family, his grandson Benjamin, was paraded before the crowd.

Benjamin, born in Madrid just over one month ago, is the child of Maradona's daughter Giannina and her fiancé, Agüero, a 20-year-old forward.

Only in Buenos Aires would family be mixed with the serious business of World Cup qualification in quite such a sentimental fashion. Other players, too, led their children onto the field, but the sight of Agüero, cuddling this tiny, black-haired figure clad in Argentina's national shirt, was astonishing.

One day, Ben will see the video of his first "national" team appearance. He will see Granddad Diego standing ramrod stiff and tight-lipped as Argentina struggled for a rhythm and for goals. And then see Maradona leaping and bellowing instructions as he used to do as a player as Messi inspired and each of the forwards scored goals.

The victory was never in doubt. Argentina will have a tougher time at high altitude in Bolivia on Wednesday. Maradona acknowledges that there is work to do, especially in defense. But he has brought the team home from Europe, where almost all of his men play. And he made it a family occasion in his home city.

## Lippi expects smooth sailing

SOCCERNET

Italy coach Marcelo Lippi has urged his side to build on the advantage they now have at the top of Group Eight as they prepare for their next World Cup qualifier against the Republic of Ireland.

Giovanni Trapattoni's men travel to Bari on Wednesday and Lippi knows that victory would set the world champions well on their way to South Africa.

"Now we have two points over Ireland who drew with Bulgaria," he said. "And we have the possibility on Wednesday to build a good advantage, even if two points is already a good advantage."

"I'm pleased with the result," continued Lippi. "In the first half we didn't play very well, we got the gift of a penalty. We didn't deserve it but we didn't concede anything."

"In the second half the team really created a lot and did so with character. We only took one of our chances but I'm happy with the lads' performance."

"I'm especially happy for Pazzini who at the moment when he touches the ball it goes in."

Pazzini is indeed going through a purple patch, having scored 11 goals in 12 appearances since joining Sampdoria

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## Marwijk happy with win

SOCCERNET

Holland coach Bert van Marwijk hailed a "terrific" performance by his side following the 3-0 win over Scotland.

"Internationally that is a fine score," he said. "We gave away only one real chance so we have done a terrific job."

"At the start our tempo was too low and Scotland were also still fresh. They kept the field small and that's why we couldn't easily penetrate their defence."

"Arjen Robben did not get enough balls from the team. We went back to building up again and again instead of making use of the wingers."

Holland are now eight points clear of Iceland and Scotland in World Cup qualifying Group Nine, but Van Marwijk is refusing to celebrate just yet.

"We have set a good pace, but it's not real yet. I will wait for that moment," he added.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar continued his scoring streak with the opening goal in the Amsterdam ArenA, with Robin van Persie and Dirk Kuyt grabbing the other goals.

"We feel good of course after four wins," Huntelaar said. "We have set a huge step towards South Africa but we are not there yet."

"When you start thinking in that way it can go wrong after all, but we have a good team."

Speaking about his goal, Huntelaar added: "That was an important goal."

"With that the spell was broken, but the match was not played. The second goal right before half-time was very nice. After that we played out the game quite easy."

Johnny Heitinga is expected to remain sidelined for Wednesday's game with Macedonia, meaning Gregory van der Wiel will continue to deputise.

# Giants show strength

AFP, Paris



World Cup winners Italy, European title-holders Spain, France, Germany and Holland showed the footballing fraternity on Saturday the established nations are only getting stronger.

Less than 15 months before the start of the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa, European top nations gave a lesson to the rest in World Cup qualifying fixtures.

Italy won 2-0 in Montenegro, Spain belaboured to a 1-0 win over Turkey in Madrid, France thanked Franck Ribery for a workmanlike 1-0 win in Lithuania, while Germany thrashed little Liechtenstein 4-0 and Holland whipped Scotland 3-0 in Amsterdam.

Smaller nations, dreaming of opening the door to South Africa, had it slammed in their faces.

French coach Raymond Domenech kept critics at bay in Kaunas, telling French television station TF1: "Something's been happening for quite a while. This team has something and the players are

saying so. It's in the process of being born, of being built, of getting prepared."

"Tonight was difficult for us but we played it in good spirit despite the state of the pitch. I will say straight away I was happy with this match."

He added they would need to keep up the same standard at home to Lithuania on Wednesday at the Stade de France. "There's another match on Wednesday and we need to be just as good if we want to get the three points."

And the 1998 winners and 2006 finalists are set far to have a long World Cup adventure if Domenech's final comments were anything to go by.

"The players know what a World Cup is," Domenech continued. "We will give it our all might till the end, but the next step is on Wednesday."

Radoslaw Batak's howler helped grant world champions Italy a comfortable night as they beat Montenegro 2-0 in Podgorica in Group Eight.

The 31-year-old centre-back, who plies his trade in Turkey at Ankaraspor, needlessly and stupidly handled a cross from Andrea Pirlo in the box and the player got up to fire in an 11th-minute penalty. Giampaolo Pazzini got Italy's second in the 74th minute. European champions Spain made it five wins on a

roll as they squeaked past Turkey 1-0 in Group Five.

After an hour of probing, Spain finally broke the deadlock at the Bernabeu stadium with Gerard Pique bundling in from point-blank range.

Barcelona's Pique, only called into the national squad last month by coach Vicente del Bosque for a debut against England, was in the right place at the right time after fellow attacking defender Sergio Ramos deflected a Xavi freekick into his path.

Germany's Michael Ballack, Marcell Jansen, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Lukas Podolski were on target against little Liechtenstein in a 4-0 thrashing. The principality is just 160 square kilometres and the national team is largely made up of part-time footballers.

Holland's march towards next year's World Cup finals in South Africa accelerated as the Oranje strolled to a 3-0 win over Scotland.

First-half headers from Klaas-Jan Huntelaar and Robin van Persie were followed by a late penalty from Dirk Kuyt as the Dutch chalked up their fourth straight win in Group Nine, extending their lead at the top of the section to eight points ahead of Macedonia's visit on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain defender Gerard Pique (R) pokes home the only goal of the game past Turkey goalkeeper Volkan Demirel in their World Cup 2010 qualifying match at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

# Golden Beckham

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham set his sights on a starring role at the World Cup after earning a record-breaking 109th cap in England's 4-0 friendly win against Slovakia.

Beckham came on for the second half at Wembley on Saturday to pass Bobby Moore's record for the most caps by an England out-field player.

Now only goalkeeper Peter Shilton, with 125 caps, stands ahead of Beckham in England's all-time appearance list.

But the AC Milan star, currently on loan in Italy from American club LA Galaxy, isn't concerned by personal landmarks. Instead he is dreaming of playing for England in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, having already featured in 1998, 2002 and 2006.

"The target is just to play, be involved in every game possible," he said. "Of course I've already said I'd love to play in another World Cup - or two!"

"But we'll have to wait and see. That's a long way away at the moment and there's a lot of games leading up to that."

Beckham's first target is to force his way into England's starting line-up for a crucial World Cup qualifier against the Ukraine at Wembley on Wednesday.

Victory in that game could leave England tantalisingly close to qualification as they already sit top of Group Six with a 100 per cent record so far.

With that in mind there are no plans for a big celebration until the job is done.

"There are no plans to go out, we're in with the team," said Beckham. "We'll be getting ready for the game on Wednesday. It was a good performance against Slovakia but now our minds are on

Wednesday against the Ukraine."

Beckham had feared his England career was over when he was dropped from the team following the 2006 World Cup finals but has fought his way back into contention and is now a regular member of Fabio Capello's squad.

"I didn't think I was going to reach 95 let alone 109 so I'm very proud and very pleased,"

"But obviously I dedicate it to my family because they are the ones who have been through the ups and downs of my career and been there for the good times and also the bad times."

"It's been a rollercoaster at times but it's been a special occasion. All my family were here so it meant a lot."

Beckham's continued presence in the England squad



PHOTO: AFP

England midfielder David Beckham plays against Slovakia to earn his 109th cap for the Three Lions to become their most capped outfield player in Wembley on Wednesday.

Beckham said.

"When you grow up, you dream about playing for your country and at Wembley. To play 109 times for England is obviously very special for me and for my family."

"I won't give this cap away, I'll keep this one for myself. It will be in my house in London, locked up!"

has not pleased everyone in his home country with some critics suggesting he should make way for younger teammates.

But his performance as a second-half substitute against Slovakia saw him made a strong case for regular inclusion.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7



PHOTO: AFP

Germany captain Michael Ballack (C) is congratulated by teammates after his spectacular strike against minnows Liechtenstein in their World Cup qualifying match at Leipzig on Wednesday.