



Australia star Harry Kewell (R) converts a penalty to make it 2-0 against Uzbekistan during their 2010 World Cup qualifier in Sydney on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Socceroos on the brink

AFP, Sydney



Australia are on the verge of qualifying for next year's World Cup finals after a 2-0 victory over Uzbekistan in their Asian group qualifier here on Wednesday.

The Socceroos, on top of their group with 13 points ahead of Japan on 11, could become the first team to qualify for South Africa if Bahrain and Qatar, both on four points, draw their match in Manama later Wednesday.

Australia's goals were a long time coming after a flat first half where the Uzbeks looked the more dangerous on the counter-attack and through the freekicks of skipper Server Djeparov.

But goals from substitute striker Josh Kennedy and a penalty from Harry Kewell seven minutes apart in the second half kept Australia unbeaten after five games and five clean sheets.

"I'm very happy with the 2-0 win, it was a very difficult first half and Uzbekistan had a lot of confidence from last Saturday's game," Australian coach Pim Verbeek said.

"They started better in the first 10-15 minutes and we for, whatever reason, were nervous, they knew how much was at stake, when you play at home you want to show the fans and that was a little difficult to get over."

"But in the second half we played faster, higher ball speed, we created more chances and we didn't give them any chance to get in and around our penalty box."

The Socceroos have three qualifiers remaining in June against Qatar in Doha, and

home games against Bahrain and Japan.

Uzbekistan almost had a dream start when striker Farhod Tadjivev, the hat-trick hero in their win over Qatar, chased down a through ball in the ninth minute, but his shot went across goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer and wide of the far post.

But Australia had an even better scoring chance six minutes later when Mark Bresciano was put on goal by Scott McDonald only to shoot straight at goalkeeper Ignaty Nesterov.

The Australians had little else to show for their slow buildups and lone striker McDonald was often isolated by the taller Uzbek defence.

Australia continued to be frustrated early in the second half and Verbeek reacted by bringing on giant striker Kennedy for McDonald.

Australia's breakthrough came six minutes after his introduction as the towering Karlsruhe striker headed home a Bresciano cross.

It was Kennedy's sixth goal in 12 appearances for his country.

The match swung decisively towards the home side when Hull City's Richard Garcia was brought down in the box by defender Hayrulla Karimov and UAE referee Ali Hamad Albadwawi pointed to the penalty spot.

Galatasaray's Kewell converted for 2-0 after 73 minutes and was substituted soon after. It was Kewell's 13th goal in 39 internationals.

Uzbekistan had the ball in the net deep in injury time but substitute Anvarjon Soliev's goal was disallowed for offside after Schwarzer had made a great reflex save from Djeparov's shot.

## Portugal see off S Africa

AFP, Lausanne

Portugal ended a three-match victory drought here on Tuesday, beating South Africa 2-0 in a friendly largely thanks to two corners from Deco.

The Chelsea midfielder was the pivotal element in Portugal's game until he was substituted by Cristiano Ronaldo, serving full back Bruno Alves early in the first half and AEK Athens striker Edinho on 57 minutes with easy close-range headers.

Portugal took the lead within minutes as an unsteady and disorganised South African defence struggled to contain Nani on the right wing.

But the Portuguese ultimately failed to take advantage of the space left to them early in a leisurely first half.

South African goalkeeper Itumeleng Khule and Blackburn's Aaron Mokoena formed a solid last rampart against the Manchester United player, allowing the Bafana Bafana to edge back into the game on a chilly evening in Lausanne.

Eduardo was rarely troubled until shortly before half-time, when he scrambled the ball clear from the feet of a South African striker in Bafana Bafana's clearest chance of the match.

Carlos Queiroz's side started the second half on top with a burst of pressure that pushed the South Africans back into their goalmouth.

A host of substitutions midway through the second half brought more pace into the game. But Brazilian coach Joel Santana failed to inject much imagination into the South African counter attacks.

Despite their skill, the 2009 Confederations Cup and 2010 World Cup hosts lacked physical presence against the more athletic Portuguese and rarely looked capable of repeating their win against Norway over the weekend.

## 'Gomez not psyched out'

AFP, Cardiff

Germany manager Joachim Loew has insisted he's not asked misfiring forward Mario Gomez to seek psychiatric help in a bid to cure the Stuttgart striker's problems in front of goal.

Gomez has not scored for his country for over a year, a run of 13 games, and was booed off by fans in Leipzig last weekend after failing to find the target in a 4-0 win over minnows Liechtenstein.

"I have not asked Gomez to see a psychiatrist, it is something for him to decide if he takes advantage of the squad's psychiatrist," Loew told reporters here on Tuesday.

"I have spoken to Mario a couple of times since the weekend, just to see how he feels and he is calm and collected about things."

"He was disappointed with himself and with the fans who booed him off the pitch. But he is okay now about things. I told him we were happy with his work-rate and effort and that being a striker is not all about scoring goals."

"He is getting plenty of support from inside the camp, he has certainly not been 'hung out to dry' in terms of taking criticism."

"We have told him we are happy with him and the work he puts in, sacrificing himself for the team."

## Ronaldo keeps scoring

Football

AP, Sao Paulo

Ronaldo scored his sixth goal in seven matches Tuesday to help Corinthians thrash Ituano 3-0 and secure a spot in the semifinals of the Sao Paulo state championship.

In Rio de Janeiro, Flamengo defeated Americano 1-0 and Vasco beat Macae by the same score.

With one round to go before the semifinals stage, Corinthians is second in the 20-team standings with 38 points, three less than defending champion Palmeiras, which drew Oeste 1-1 earlier Tuesday. Sao Paulo is third and Portuguesa fourth. The top four clubs will advance.

Ronaldo, staging his third comeback from serious knee surgeries, gathered a cross from defender Alessandro and delivered a right-footed shot from near the penalty spot in the 27th minute.

Striker Jorge Henrique opened the scoring for the four-time national champion with a header just two minutes into the match at Pacaembu stadium, and midfielder Cristian added to Corinthians' first-half lead with a well-struck freekick in the 41st.

The 32-year-old Ronaldo also had a goal disallowed in the 85th after he was ruled offside.

Corinthians, which had won only one of its last four matches, played a man up from the 79th when Ituano defender Ceara was ejected after receiving two yellow

cards.

Corinthians' rival Palmeiras missed a chance to clinch first place and secure home ground advantage throughout the finals stage after drawing Oeste 1-1 in Itapolis.

Palmeiras, which has led the traditional regional tour-

nament by as many as seven points, needs a home victory against Botafogo in Sunday's final round to avoid being overtaken by Sao Paulo, which will host Guaratingueta on Thursday at Morumbi stadium and can move to within two points with a victory.



PHOTO: AFP

Superstar Ronaldo celebrates after scoring his side Corinthians' second goal against Ituano during their Paulista Championship match at the Pacaembu Stadium in Sao Paulo on Tuesday.

## Maicon suffers leg injury

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan's Brazilian defender Maicon will be out of action for several weeks after injuring his right leg in Sunday's World Cup qualifier draw in Ecuador, club doctor Franco Combi said Tuesday.

Combi told the Inter website that Maicon had suffered "a serious injury to his right leg" without elaborating.

He added that Brazil doctor Jose Luis Runco would treat the player until he returned to Italy in around ten days.

Italian media said that Maicon, a regular under Inter coach Jose Mourinho scoring five times in 40 games, would not be back in action before the final two or three matches of the league season.

## Venezuela stun Colombia

AP, Puerto Ordaz

Venezuela tightened South American qualifying for the 2010 World Cup with a 2-0 victory over Colombia on Tuesday night.

Colombia squandered the opportunity to move into fifth place in qualifying, while Venezuela is eighth, but, with 13 points, trails Colombia by just one. The Venezuelans are even with Ecuador in points, trailing on goal differential. Ecuador hosts Paraguay on Wednesday.

Substitute striker Nicolas Fedor opened the scoring after 78 minutes, then midfielder Juan Arango curled home a free kick in the 83rd minute.

The Colombians played with 10 men for the last 72 minutes after midfielder Abel Aguilar was sent off for two yellow cards, the second for upending Alejandro Moreno of the Columbus Crew of MLS.

Colombia still trails fifth-place Uruguay by two points. The top four teams automatically make the field for South Africa 2010, with the fifth-place team going into a playoff for a berth.

Venezuela had several promising scoring chances in the first half, but failed to find the net. A left-footed strike from Arango toward the end of the period was the closest the home side came to taking the lead through 45 minutes.

The match remained well-balanced after the break, but Venezuela finally made the extra man count before 30,000 in Cachamay Stadium, about 300 miles southeast of Caracas.

## Schwarzer eyes L'pool scalp

INTERNET, undated

Fulham keeper Mark Schwarzer is determined to dent Liverpool's title hopes this weekend and keep the Cottagers on course for a top 10 finish. Roy Hodgson's side beat Manchester United last time out to open up the title race, but Australia goalkeeper Schwarzer is determined to spring another surprise by beating Liverpool at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

He told the club's official website: "You want to play well against a team like Liverpool because they're quite rightly regarded as one of the best teams in the world."

"We have a lot of respect for them, but we want to get one up on them as well."

## Wolfsburg worry Rensing

AFP, Berlin



Barcelona may loom on the horizon, but Bayern Munich goalkeeper Michael Rensing admits the German giants are more concerned about taking three league points from Wolfsburg's impregnable lair on Saturday.

Bayern face Barcelona at the Nou Camp stadium next Wednesday in the Champions League quarterfinal, but on Saturday they aim to become the first side this season to win at Wolfsburg's Volkswagen Arena stadium by taking three points from their rivals.

"Wolfsburg matters just as much as Barcelona - especially because we have to qualify for next season's Champions League through the Bundesliga," said Rensing who succeeded goalkeeper legend Oliver Kahn between Bayern's posts.

"It's always tough when you have a real highlight coming up, but on the other hand, we can't afford to shift down a gear in the league."

"We know every game is a final and that we can't afford to let up, so we'll be totally focused."

Both Bayern and Wolfsburg are locked on 48 points, just one behind Bundesliga leaders Hertha Berlin.

And Rensing has every right to be wary of Wolfsburg's hot-shot strikers Grafite and Edin Dzeko who are currently the most dangerous in the Bundesliga.

"Wolfsburg are very, very dangerous up front, but if the rest of the team does its job, I won't have much to do," said Rensing.

"Whatever, I still have to be prepared for a busy afternoon."

With 18 goals in 16 games, Brazil's Grafite has scored four goals in his last two league games including a hat-trick against Schalke 04 while Dzeko has scored in six of the last seven matches.

Both scored past Rensing when Wolfsburg bolted into a 2-0 lead at Munich's Allianz Arena in October before Bayern scored four unanswered goals.

Former Bayern boss Felix Magath has since forged Wolfsburg into a tough team and although he is claiming his side cannot win the league title, they are still very much in the hunt.

"Wolfsburg are definitely a surprise package," said Rensing.

"If they keep it up, they can remain there or thereabouts."

"Saturday's game is crucial for both teams, but it's not a title decider."

"There are still too many games to go, but we need to take at least a point at the very least."

Bayern can ill afford to lose either Saturday's league clash or the Champions League quarterfinal if they want to stay in the running for either competition.

"I'm personally thrilled we now face the most decisive matches of the season," said Rensing.

Championship club Southampton are on the brink of becoming English football's first major casualty of the credit crunch after missing an end-of-March deadline to secure new financing.

## Credit crunch bites Saints

AFP, London

The company warned that it would not be viable without fresh funds, which are likely to prove difficult to find in the current economic climate.

If a last-minute solution cannot be found, the company will have to be placed in administration, a move that, under Football League rules, would normally lead to a deduction of ten points.

In Southampton's case that would mean almost certain relegation to League One, the third tier of English football. The club is currently second from bottom of the Championship, three points adrift of safety with only seven matches left.

Southampton's financial plight is largely the consequence of the club's decision to build a new 30,000-seat stadium, St Mary's, four years ago.

## Rio won't get carried away

Football

AFP, London

Rio Ferdinand insists England's stars won't get carried away by the hype surrounding Fabio Capello's revitalised squad.

Capello has restored the feelgood factor around the English national team in little more than a year in charge and the plaudits are beginning to flow freely from fans and media alike.

But Ferdinand has seen it all before and knows only too well the corrosive effect excessive praise can have on a team.

Whenever England have a few good results they are instantly crowned as world-beaters even though those gaudy claims rarely stand the test of time.

In the past Ferdinand believes some England players were only too willing to bask in the praise and took their eye off the ball.

Fortunately for the Manchester United defender, England now have a manager far too canny and ruthless to let that kind of complacent attitude infiltrate the camp.

"There's no chance of this squad getting too big for our boots or people believing the hype. We don't look at what is being said on the outside," Ferdinand said.

"In the past, maybe the media have had a stranglehold on the squads, in terms of our outlook and expectations of ourselves."

"Maybe there's been a possibility that the outside attention had an effect on the squad. This manager is very good and that can't happen in this squad."

"We want to win games. For me, everything else is a blur. We get on with what we're doing. The only difference now is that the environment we're in now, no one is not allowed to get carried away with it."

"If we're not focused and adhering to his plans, there's a strong possibility that you won't play."

Ferdinand, who recovered from a groin injury in time to be available for selection against Ukraine, cites the example of Michael Owen's fall from grace as evidence that no player can take their place for granted under Capello.

Owen was a mainstay of the England team for a decade before Capello took over last year and repaid his managers' faith with 40 goals in 89 appearances.

But the Newcastle striker's attitude and, more importantly, his continued struggles with injury haven't impressed Capello. Even injuries to Emile Heskey, Carlton Cole and Darren Bent ahead of the Ukraine match couldn't per-

suade the England coach to hand Owen a recall.

"There can be no complacency in this squad. Look at Michael Owen. You'd have said Michael was bang on to get 100 caps two or three years ago, and that it would be a given that he'd be in every squad when he was fit. But this manager has come in and he's seeing things from a different angle," Ferdinand said.

"If you're not fit enough or you're not on form, you won't get in the squad. Rightly so. That's the way it's got to be."

Ferdinand has no problem with Capello's hardline stance because it gives players no room to slack off.

"It keeps the hunger in your belly, the desire and the passion," he said. "If you get into the situation where people are almost not worried about the squad coming out because they're expecting always to be in the squad, then that's a bad place to start from."

"It's better if people are on their toes. You can't say anyone in this team, really, even if they've played five or six games, is guaranteed to be in the team."

"Whereas, if you look back over the last 20 or 25 years, you could say there have been four or five players who you could say it didn't really matter if they played poorly. They'd always get the shirt."

## Magpies turn to Shearer

Football

AFP, Newcastle

Alan Shearer is to become Newcastle's fourth manager this season after agreeing to take on the challenge of saving the club he used to captain from relegation.

Shearer, 38, a hero to the Magpies' fans for his exploits on the pitch, had long been tipped as a future manager of the club but he could never have envisaged taking over in such difficult circumstances.

Newcastle are currently third from bottom of the Premier League, two points adrift of Blackburn, the club currently occupying the last survival spot.

Shearer, who has no coaching experience, has just eight games to save the club from the financially calamitous consequences of relegation and Chelsea's visit on Saturday means he could hardly have a tougher start to his reign.

Newcastle turned to Shearer as it became clear that, under the temporary management of caretaker boss Chris Hughton, the club was drifting towards disaster after a run which has seen them win only one of their last 12 league matches.

Hughton had taken charge of the first-team in February after Joe Kinnear, who was only appointed as an interim boss following the departure of Kevin Keegan in September, underwent a heart bypass.

Kinnear has been unable to return to work and Newcastle owner Mike Ashley decided he had to act to stop the rot.

That meant sending out an SOS to Shearer, despite the fact that Ashley has passed on previous opportunities to install the club's greatest ever goalscorer in the manager's office.

Shearer, who has mostly worked as a television pundit

since hanging up his boots three years ago, had made it clear he wanted the job in January 2008, when Sam Allardyce was sacked.

He had also signalled that, subject to certain conditions, he would be prepared to take over when the second spell of Keegan, like Shearer a former Newcastle striker revered by the north-east side's fans, as manager ended in acrimony in September.

Despite reservations in some quarters about Shearer's lack of coaching experience, the news of his appointment was greeted with delight by the vast majority of Newcastle fans.

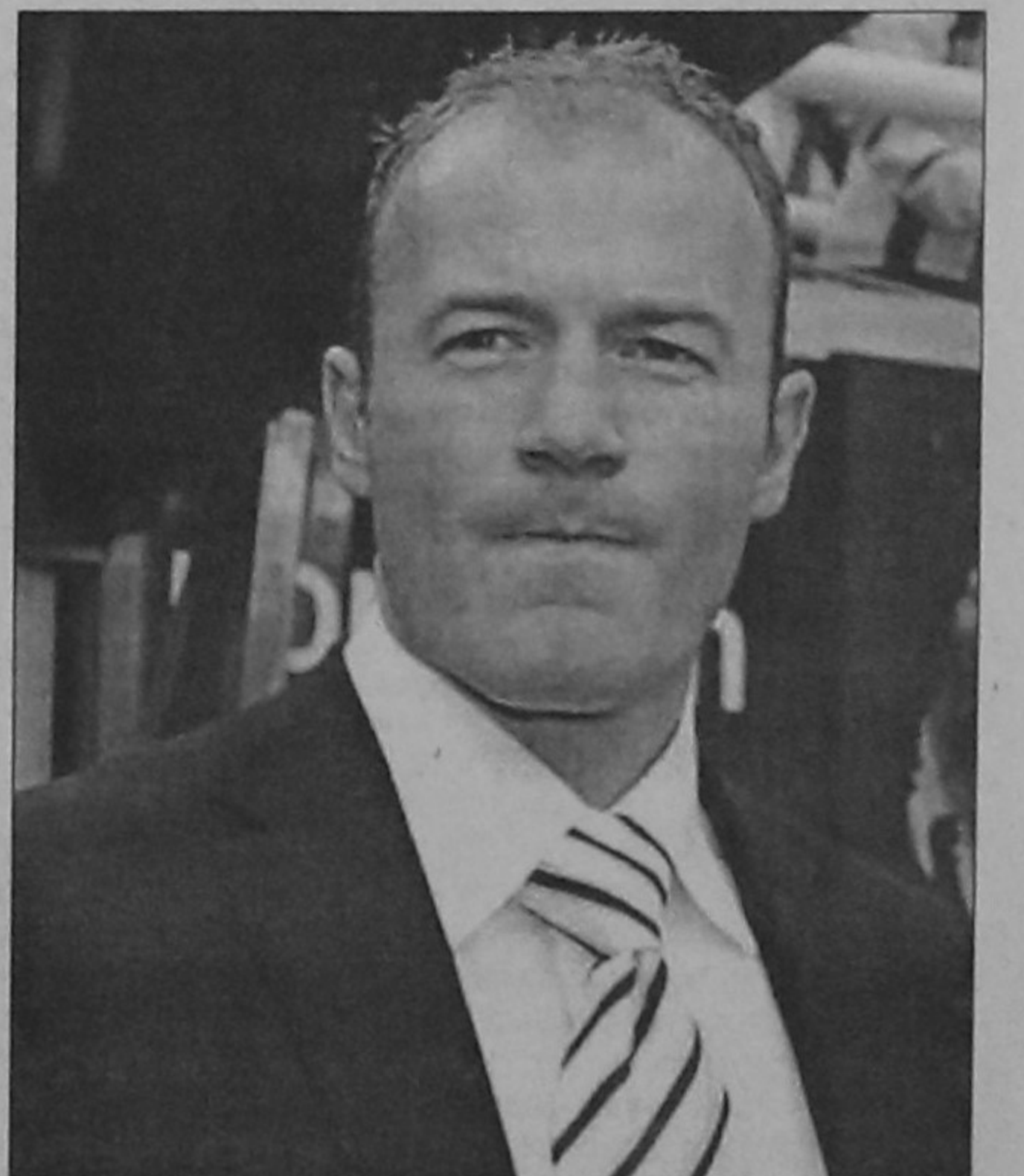
Sir John Hall, the former chairman who was responsible for bringing Shearer to

Newcastle in his playing days, backed the former England striker to succeed and said he should be appointed on a long-term basis.

"I would have preferred him to come back as long-term manager because I've always felt he was the only man at this moment in time who could manage Newcastle," Hall said.

"He's the most dedicated professional I've ever known in my time in the game. Desperate measures, desperate times. There's a gap opening up at the bottom of the table and he'll galvanise all the fans - let's hope he galvanises the players."

"It's got to happen on the park. If it doesn't happen on the park we'll go down."



ALAN SHEARER