

England, Spain cruise

AFP, Paris



England qualified for the 2010 World Cup finals in style on Wednesday, thrashing Euro 2008 nemesis Croatia 5-1 at Wembley and were later joined by European champions Spain who easily beat Estonia 3-0.

England had enjoyed one of their worst moments two years ago when beaten by the Croats at Wembley which saw them lose out on the Euro 2008 finals at their rivals expense.

But Italian Fabio Capello has rebuilt their morale and self-belief to such an extent they totally outclassed pretty much the same Croat side.

Capello was delighted with the performance and the outcome.

"The spirit of the group, the concentration in every moment of the game, the players helping each other, the movement when the ball was with the opponents and when we had it - I was very happy with everything," purred the stylish Italian.

Capello's satisfaction at qualifying was hardly mirrored by his Spanish counterpart, the lugubrious Vicente Del Bosque despite it being eight wins from eight.

"It wasn't our best game tonight but we have qualified for the World Cup and that is the main thing," said the former Real Madrid coach.

"We are not thinking about the World Cup just yet. We just have to prepare for the next few games which we want to win and continue our momentum."

Elsewhere, 2006 World Cup finalists France and the team they beat in the

semifinals Portugal looked to be on safer ground for qualifying as the French drew 1-1 away at Group Seven leaders Serbia despite playing most of the match down with 10 players - goalkeeper Hugo Lloris getting his marching orders.

Portugal gained a much needed victory over Hungary in Budapest with Pepe getting their goal in the ninth minute and putting them in even with a chance of winning Group One with two matches remaining.

"I'm proud of everything about the match," said France coach Domenech.

"I'm happy for the people who believed in us and supported us. I still believe and it's not over. I will congratulate my players."

France, though, are four points clear in second of Austria, who drew 1-1 away in Romania, whose desperate home form has cost them dearly with just two points from a possible 12 this campaign.

Portugal may still be outside the top two but Denmark being held 1-1 in Albania and Sweden beating Malta, only thanks to an 81st minute own-goal, sees them just two points off second and five off the Danes with two games to go.

Slovakia look the likeliest winners of Group Three as they won 2-0 in impressive style in Northern Ireland meaning their neighbours the Czech Republic can only hope at best for the runners-up spot.

The Czechs won 7-0 at home to minnows San Marino but it was more memorable for the return of playmaker Tomas Rosicky after 20 months out with injury.

Armenia grabbed their first win of the campaign beating former European finalists and 1986 World Cup semifinalists Belgium 2-1 in Yerevan in Group Five leading to the resignation of coach Frankie Vercauteren.

Croatia have just one match left.

France's result relied on a gutsy effort in the hostile atmosphere of the



PHOTO: AFP

Italy defender Fabio Grosso celebrates scoring the opening goal against Bulgaria during their 2010 World Cup qualifier in Turin on Wednesday.

EURO ZONE 2010WC QUALIFIER RESULTS

AFP, Paris

Collected results of 2010 World Cup European Zone qualifiers on Wednesday:

Group One

Malta 0 Sweden 1 (Azzopardi 81+90)

Albania 1 (Bogdani 51) Denmark 1 (Bendtner 40)

Hungary 0 Portugal 1 (Pepe 9)

Group Two

Israel 7 (Barda 9, 21, 44, Brochyan 15, Golan 58, Sahar 63, 84) Luxembourg 0

Latvia 2 (Cauna 62, Astafevs 75) Switzerland 2 (Frei 43, Derdikov 80)

Moldova 1 (Andronic 90) Greece 1 (Gekas 33)

Group Three

Czech Republic 7 (Baros 28, 44, 45+3-pen, 66, Sverek 47, 90+5, Necid 86) San Marino 0

Slovenia 3 (Dedic 13, Novakovic 45, Birs 63) Poland 0

Northern Ireland 0 Slovakia 2 (Sestak 15, Holosko 66)

Group Four

Liechtenstein 1 (Pöverino 75) Finland 1 (Litmanen 73-pen)

Germany 4 (Ballack 14-pen, Klose 55, 66, Podolski 71) Azerbaijan 0

Wales 1 (Collins 54) Russia 3 (Semeshov 36, Ignashevich 71, Pavlyuchenko 90)

Group Five

Armenia 2 (Goaryan 23, Ovsepyan 50) Belgium 1 (Van Buyten 90+2)

Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Salihi 25) Turkey 1 (Belozoglu 4)

Spain 3 (Fabregas 33, Cazorla 82, Mata 90+3) Estonia 0

Group Six

Belarus 0 Ukraine 0

Andorra 1 (Sonejee 69) Kazakhstan 3 (Hizhniachenko 14, 34, Balyiyev 28)

England 5 (Lampard 7-pen, 59 Gerrard 18, 66, Rooney 78)

Croatia 1 (Eduardo 73)

Group Seven

Romania 1 (Bucur 54) Austria 1 (Schiemer 82)

Faroe Islands 2 (S. Olsen 15, Hansen 35) Lithuania 1 (Danilevicius 23)

Serbia 1 (Milić 13-pen) France 1 (Henry 31)

Group Eight

Montenegro 1 (Vucinic 57-pen)

Cyprus 1 (Okkas 64)

Italy 2 (Grosso 11, Iaquinta 40)

Bulgaria 0

Group Nine

Scotland 0 Holland 1 (Elia 84)

Norway 2 (Helstad 2, Risse 26)

Macedonia 1 (Grcicov 79)

Iniesta set for return

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Spain international Andres Iniesta, who has been sidelined for over three months due to a thigh muscle tear, has been given the green light to return to action, the club said on Wednesday.

The 25-year-old midfielder, who has not featured since Barcelona's Champions League final win over Manchester United in Rome on May 27, could return in the club's league match at Getafe on Saturday.

Iniesta suffered a tear about two centimetres long in his right thigh muscle during Barcelona's 3-3 draw against Villarreal in the Spanish league on May 10.

He aggravated the injury by continuing to play and his recovery was then complicated by a viral infection.

The injury caused Iniesta to pull out of Spain's Confederations Cup campaign in South Africa in June; a competition which was won by Brazil.

Press hail English

AFP, London

England's convincing qualification for the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa had the headline writers reaching for the puns Thursday, with the Sun urging readers to "Get De Beers in".

The tabloid's reference to the South African diamond mining giant was splashed across its front page, below a photograph of Steven Gerrard celebrating one of his goals in the 5-1 thrashing of Croatia on Wednesday.

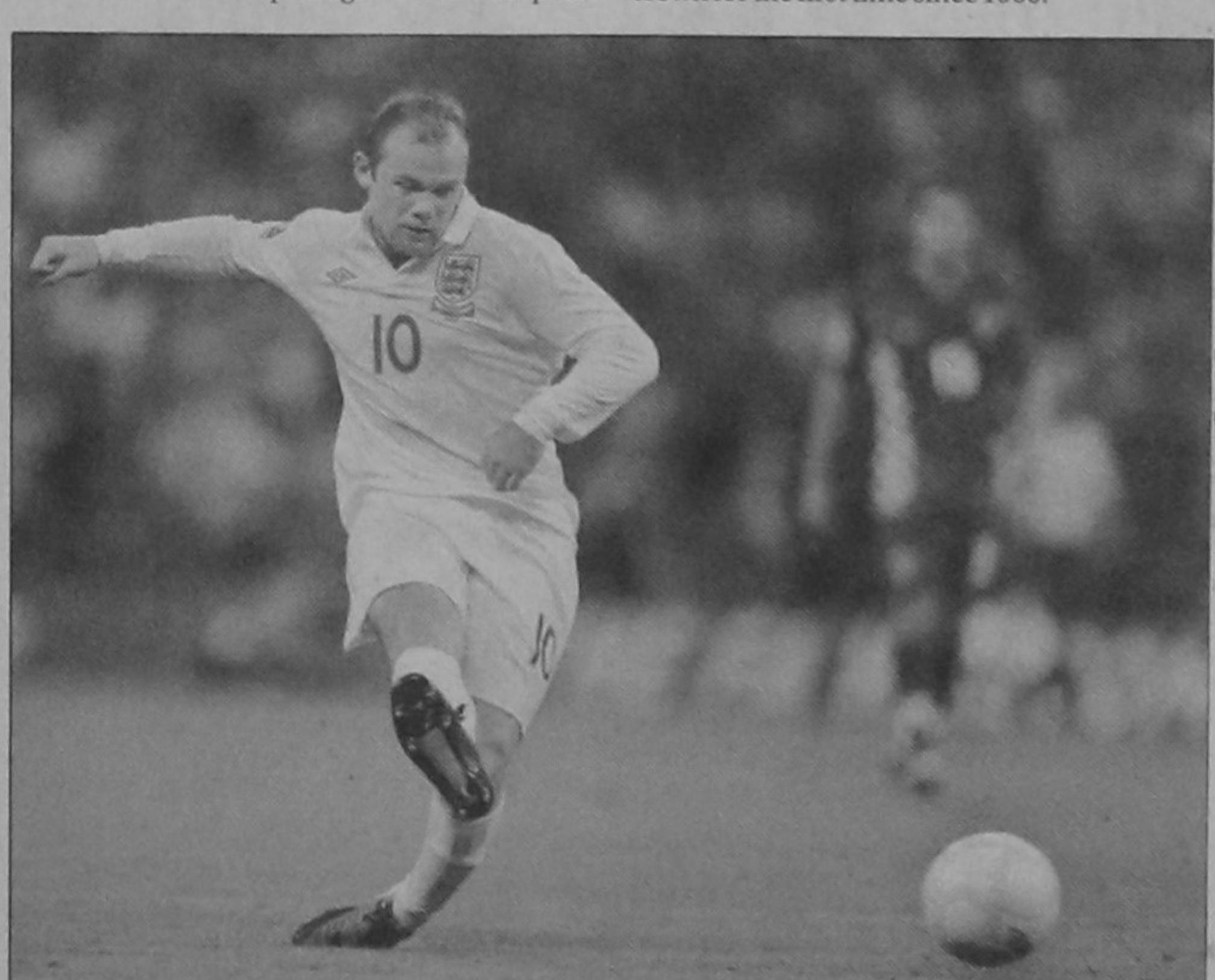
The Sun topped off the page with a list of well-known South Africans, led off by Nelson Mandela but also including wilebeest, giraffes, and, in the paper's typically blunt style, "that girl runner who looks like a bloke".

Not to be outdone, the Mirror's front-page proclaimed "Bok of the net".

England's win was all the sweeter because it came against the country that thwarted its hopes of qualifying for the Euro 2008 finals.

"We owed you that," said another Sun headline.

Steve McClaren was in charge of England when the defeat to Croatia two years ago blocked his team's passage to the European



England striker Wayne Rooney shoots to score the fifth goal during their 2010 World Cup qualifier against Croatia at Wembley on Wednesday.