



Netherlands midfielder Wesley Sneijder (L) is about to kick the ball during their international friendly against Australia in Sydney on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

## Maradona not quitting

SOCERNET

Beleaguered Argentina boss Diego Maradona has denied he could walk away from the job due to alleged differences with technical director Carlos Bilardo.

Maradona stated on Tuesday that whatever the outcome of the final two qualifiers this week, which could see Argentina eliminated from the World Cup, he would consider his future. But he now insists that his words have been twisted.

"I'm not giving up nor am I going. I never said I could resign," Maradona told a press conference. "I'm asking the press for a bit of respect."

"I only said that after the qualifiers I had to meet with Julio Grondona to talk about what happened during the whole of this year. It was you who said about resigning."

"I had to organise a meeting with the players to tell them that this wasn't true because a journalist told (Martin) Demichelis and he asked me afterwards. The day I have to leave I will say."

"I could at this moment have been smoking a cigar rather than talking to you. I did it because I respect your work and because it's my work."

Maradona and Bilardo reportedly barely speak to each other, with Maradona unhappy at interference in team affairs.

## Capello's squad stronger: Sven

SOCERNET

Former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson is certain the squad Fabio Capello will take to the World Cup next summer will be stronger than the ones he had.

Although it is over three years since Eriksson vacated the England hot-seat, plenty of sceptics still argue the Swede wasted the supposed golden generation.

Yet, as the Three Lions wrap up the most successful qualifying campaign in their history this week, Eriksson insists the squad Capello has at his disposal is better.

"It is stronger now. I am sure about that," he said. "They have a lot more mature players, who are at exactly the right age. A lot of the important players have already been to major tournaments. That is bound to help as well. I just hope they can be successful."

Eriksson will be reacquainted with the England team on Saturday night when he is a studio guest for the groundbreaking internet broadcast of the World Cup qualifier in the Ukraine.

Supporters are being asked to either subscribe to a national newspaper website, or attend selected local cinemas to see if England - who secured qualification by beating Croatia at Wembley last month - can deny the Ukraine a play-off berth by extending an eight-match winning streak.

"The players are there and the manager is good," enthused Eriksson. "Everything is in place for them to do extremely well next summer. It is still a long way off, which is one of the problems, but I am sure England are capable of going very close."

Such comments are bound to heighten expectation around Capello's England. As someone who guided England to three quarterfinals - but no further - Eriksson knows better than most how rampant expectation around the national side can be.

Not that he believes Capello's players should be affected. After playing for so long at the highest level, it just comes with the territory.

"Expectations are always high around England," said Eriksson. "But that is part of the game. No-one can deny England have been one of the best teams in qualifying."

"They have done so incredibly well. Now everyone will look to see whether they can maintain that form in South Africa. I think they can."

## Fergie says sorry

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson on Saturday apologised for a verbal assault on referee Alan Wiley after the Football Association demanded he explain why he labelled the official as "unfit" after United's 2-2 home draw with Sunderland last week.

The FA have yet to meet with Ferguson on the issue but the United coach moved to head off a potential charge of improper conduct which could bring a touchline ban and a possible fine by saying he was sorry.

"I apologise to Mr Wiley for any personal embarrassment my comments may have caused and to the FA for going public with my views," said Ferguson.

"In retrospect I accept that they could be deemed as expressing those views in an inappropriate form. It was never my intention to bring the focus of intense media interest on Mr Wiley and I will apologise to him personally when I return from an overseas trip during the

international break," he said.

Ferguson's outburst outraged leading English referees and now retired former top official Jeff Winter, blasted it as "a cowardly attack."

"Every game Alan Wiley takes charge of now where he makes a decision which upsets some fans is going to result in chants of 'You're not fit to referee', he's going to be known as the 'unfit ref'," Winter told the Guardian newspaper.

"Sir Alex won't care though. He's a knight of the realm and he thinks he's untouchable, bullet proof," added Winter, who dubbed Sir Alex "a bully."

Ferguson told United's in-house television station: "He (Wiley) was not fit enough for a game of that standard. The pace of the game demanded a referee who was fit. He was not fit. It is an indictment of our game. You see referees abroad who are as fit as butcher's dogs. We have some who are fit. He wasn't fit."

At 49, Wiley is one of the oldest referees officiating at the top level in England but his supporters say his fitness, like that of other officials, is subjected to weekly monitoring and a demanding annual assessment.

## City sweat on Zabaleta

SOCERNET



Defender Pablo Zabaleta is a doubt for Manchester City's Premier League match at Wigan in just over a week's time after he returned home early from international duty.

The Argentina right-back travelled to South America despite reporting a hamstring problem after Monday's draw with Aston Villa.

Zabaleta has not played for his country since the Beijing Olympics over a year ago but was named in Diego Maradona's squad for crucial World Cup qualifiers against Peru and Uruguay.

However, the 24-year-old's participation was always in doubt from the moment he complained of a problem having come off after 90 minutes at Villa Park.

"Pablo is coming back," said City boss Mark Hughes.

"He's been with the Argentinian FA who have checked him out, as after the game last Monday he said that he had felt something with the last kick of the game. He'd felt a slight strain in the hamstring but he needed to travel to

Argentina to get it verified.

"Pablo's not played that many games, and there is always a danger that this kind of thing might happen to someone who, like Pablo, has not played as much as others. It's a disappointment for him. Argentina have two crucial games and he wanted to be part of that, but it wasn't to be."

"He's played very well of late and that was flagged to the powers that be in Argentina. It would have been great for him to get the recognition for his good form, but it is unfortunate that he's going to miss out. He'll be back today and once we get him scanned hopefully it will not be as bad as feared."

"But as it stands you have to say that there is a real doubt that he would be available for our game next weekend."

Hughes is more optimistic about centre-back Kolo Toure's chances of facing the Latics at the DW Stadium. Earlier this week the Ivory Coast defender insisted he would be ready, having pulled out of international duty against Malawi.

"Kolo got a really bad bang on the heel pad of his right leg which was very sore immediately after the (Villa) game," he told the club's official website.

"He was checked out and it was felt that it was not advisable for him to join up with his country."

"He would probably not have been able to train and would have been touch-and-go for the game. He's been kept back and has had treatment. The hope is that he'll be okay but we'll have to see how it settles down over the next few days."

## C'ron to model Armani underwear

AP, Rome

Italian fashion designer Armani says soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo will model underwear and jeans in a new worldwide advertising campaign.

Milan-based Giorgio Armani SpA says Friday the Ronaldo ads will start in spring 2010. Ronaldo signed with Real Madrid over the summer after leaving Manchester United. He also plays for Portugal's national team.

Ronaldo follows the lead of David Beckham, who posed seductively in Emporio Armani underwear in a previous campaign including billboard ads.

## IN BRIEF

### Kaiser wants Messi in SA

INTERNET, undated

Franz Beckenbauer, who won the 1974 World Cup as a player before lifting the trophy in 1990 as West Germany's manager, believes that Lionel Messi must be among those in South Africa next summer.

"There cannot be a World Cup without a player like Like Messi," Beckenbauer told El Mundo.

"The ridicule of not being in the World Cup is threatening Argentina. Diego Maradona must now demonstrate that those who doubt him are wrong."

"I saw how Maradona publicly asked for God's help. The pressure is almost inhuman."

### FA denies £400k WC bonus

SOCERNET

The Football Association have denied reports that they are negotiating a deal which would earn England players a World Cup bonus of £400,000 each if the Three Lions triumph in South Africa next year.

Saturday's newspapers suggested the FA are earmarking £5.5 million to be split between the 23-man squad should England win the World Cup for the first time since 1966.

That would see each member collect a tidy sum, although in some cases it is not even a month's wages for their clubs.

It could also be argued the FA would gain far more through increased exposure and the sponsorship that would follow from having the world's number one team.

However, it seems the speculation is premature, with the FA claiming discussions have yet to take place over the bonus structure.

"We are surprised by today's stories, as the fact is that to date there have not been any meetings, discussions or indication given regarding any payments of World Cup bonuses," said FA director of communications Adrian Bevington.

## Socceroos hold Dutch

Football

AFP, Sydney

The Netherlands have still to beat Australia in three meetings after they had to settle with a scoreless draw in their international friendly here on Saturday.

The world number three Dutch controlled the match but could not come up with the winner their dominance deserved with their intricate short passing game.

Both nations have already qualified for next year's World Cup finals in South Africa, but the 14th-ranked Soccerroos can take pride in that they have yet to lose to the Dutchmen.

The Soccerroos, under previous Dutch coach Guus Hiddink, drew 1-1 with the Netherlands in Rotterdam as a lead-up game to the 2006 World Cup in Germany and downed the Dutch 2-1 in Eindhoven in September last year.

That was the last time the Dutch have been defeated in 12 subsequent internationals, including an unbeaten World Cup qualifying campaign.

"The only thing that was not so good was that we didn't score a goal," Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk said.

"I think we deserved to score a goal to win the game. I think Australia had just half a chance for the whole game."

"We knew the Australian team and I know (their Dutch coach) Pim (Verbeek) very well. They wait for a mistake from our team and play the counter, but we have a different way of playing."

The Australians had a chance to snatch victory in the final minutes when Brett Holman

was clear on goal but he blasted his angled volley over the bar.

"This was a very good test for us, the Dutch team made us work very hard and we had to concentrate and do a well organised job and I think we did that," Verbeek said.

"When we had the ball we lost it too easily and we didn't create because there wasn't enough real chances."

"We know that we still have to improve because we could see that the Dutch team was in every aspect of football the better team."

The Dutch with Wesley Sneijder and Demy de Zeeuw running the midfield, dominated the opening half.

The Orange team controlled possession and had more of the scoring chances, with AC Milan striker Klaas Jan Hunteelaar twice heading well over the bar from good positions.

The Soccerroos had an early setback when Blackburn Rovers defensive midfielder Vince Grella left the field with a thigh injury, making way for Italian-based understudy Carl Valeri.

It took the Australians over 20 minutes to get the ball into the Dutch box and Holman forced their goalkeeper Maarten Stekelenburg into a save minutes later.

Liverpool star Dirk Kuyt was replaced by his Liverpool team mate Ryan Babel at half-time and Verbeek hauled off Tim Cahill. Josh Kennedy and Craig Moore in a triple substitution to save them for next week's AFC Asian Cup qualifier with Oman in Melbourne.

Blackburn Rovers utility Brett Emerton came on for his first appearance for Australia since June last year after a serious knee injury.

Sneijder, who was troubled by influenza this week, was brought off after 69 minutes for Orlando Engelaar.

## Bebel's gay U-turn

Football

AFP, Creteil

A mainly Muslim non-league French side said they could take on rivals consisting of gay players after all, four days after snubbing them in what the former Saturday insisted was a "misunderstanding."

Paris Foot Gay (PFG) were set to play fellow Creteil side Bebel, who are composed of mainly Muslim players last week but Bebel cried off a day beforehand, sending an email in which they regretted they could not honour the match as doing so was "against their principles."

"Sorry, but because of the name of your team and in keeping with the principles of the team, which is a team of practising Muslims, we cannot play against you," said the e-mail, according to PFG's co-founder and current president Pascal Brethes.

It added: "Our convictions are stronger than a game of football. Sorry to have informed you so late."

PFG deplored what they saw as a "homophobic" decision.

But on Saturday, Bebel director Zahir

Belgharbi insisted there had been "a misunderstanding" and sent out a statement through club lawyer Benedicte Puybasset indicating they were indeed ready "to play the match."

Puybasset regretted that the matter had grown out of all proportion but local league president Jacques Stouvenel told AFP both clubs had been summoned to a meeting next Tuesday to assess the situation, warning that Bebel could be disciplined or even thrown out of the league.

Belgharbi told AFP Saturday's statement was designed to "re-establish the truth and settle everything on the grounds of good sense," rowing back on the initial snub.

"We had rejected playing this match not on the grounds of homophobia, as we have been accused of doing, but simply because the name of the club (PFG) did not seem to us to reflect our vision of sport," said Belgharbi, saying his club believed no ethnic or religious slant should be placed on footballing matters.

"We reacted by turning down the invitation from Paris Foot Gay for fear of it leading to an instrumentalisation on the part of this club in that it was highlighting the homosexuality of its players," he added.

Brethes says his club is a haven for all kinds of races and also welcomes non-gay players.

## Youzhny-Tsonga final

Tennis

AFP, Tokyo

Mikhail Youzhny of Russia edged past former world number one Lleyton Hewitt of Australia on Saturday to set up a final against Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in the Japan Open tennis tournament.

The unseeded Russian, who shocked defending champion Tomas Berdych of the Czech Republic in the quarterfinals on Friday, kept his momentum going to score a 6-2, 5-7, 7-5 victory over the Australian eighth seed.

The 2008 Australian Open finalist Tsonga, the second seed from France, beat compatriot Gael Monfils 6-3, 6-3 in the second semifinal.

"Here I played four matches at the same level -- I can say, at a high level," said Youzhny, who also eliminated third-seeded Gilles Simon of France in the second round.

"For me, it's more important to play a good game, not only one match, not only one set, but whole matches. I just want to continue and play the same tennis in the final," he added.

After breaking Hewitt twice to take the first set with ease, Youzhny found further break opportunities hard to come by.

He hit two double faults to put Hewitt 15-40 up in the 11th game of the second set, which he

eventually lost with a backhand error to tie the match at one-set all.

The final set again went with serve, with Youzhny saving one break point in the fifth game, but the Russian took an advantage point in the 12th on Hewitt's serve -- his first match point.

The tough battle, which lasted two hours and 39 minutes, ended abruptly when Hewitt hit a backhand shot into the net.

"In the first set I was able to play really well. I think he was a little bit slow, and I was slow in the next two sets. But from my side, I didn't make many mistakes," said Youzhny.

"The second set was close, and I had no chances. The final set was also very close and I didn't have any chances to break him. Only in the last game, I took three good points."

Meanwhile, Tsonga's play was "perfect," according to Monfils, who was on court for only 55 minutes.

"Today, he (Tsonga) just played unbelievably. He was too good today. I had no chance."

Tsonga said that, "I felt that I had a lot of power. The ball went in all the time, so it was difficult for my opponent to hit the ball back."

For the final against Youzhny, Tsonga said: "I know it's going to be difficult, because he takes the ball early and goes to the net quickly, he can do everything. It's going to be tough."



Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France flashes the victory sign after defeating compatriot Gael Monfils during their Japan Open semifinal in Tokyo on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP