

France take crucial lead

AFP, Paris



France closed in on the World Cup finals on Saturday as fellow star-studded giants Portugal

struggled for a 1-0 home victory over Bosnia-Herzegovina on a night of tense, first-leg play-off ties. Nicolas Anelka gave France a crucial 1-0 win over Ireland in Dublin as the 1998 world champions and 2006 runners-up gained the upper-hand ahead of the return in Paris on Wednesday. Chelsea striker Anelka struck the vital away goal with 18 minutes left at Croke Park with his shot taking a wicked deflection off Sean St Ledger and past Ireland goalkeeper Shay Given.

Ireland had wasted a golden opportunity in the first half when Liam Lawrence missed the target from just eight yards.

In Lisbon, Portugal, the 2006 semifinalists but playing without the injured Cristiano Ronaldo, struggled to a win

over Bosnia Herzegovina.

It could have been a black night for the Portuguese who were saved by the woodwork on three occasions, including twice in the last minute.

Porto defender Bruno Alves was on target with a powerful backpost header after 31 minutes for the game's only goal.

But Senijad Ibrahimovic crashed a header against the crossbar before a dramatic final minute which saw Bosnian striker Edin Dzeko's far-post header come off the crossbar while Zlatan Muslimovic's follow-up volley came off the post.

Meanwhile, unheralded Slovenia and Ukraine took tentative steps closer to finals.

Despite losing 2-1 to Russia in Moscow, Nejc Pecnik's goal two minutes from time gave Slovenia hope that they can make sure of a second World Cup appearance in Wednesday's return leg.

Ukraine, who were quarterfinalists in 2006, will also be confident of achieving back-to-back World Cup spots, after holding 2004 European champions Greece

to a 0-0 draw in Athens.

In Moscow, Everton midfielder Diniyar Bilyaletdinov scored twice for Guus Hiddink's Russian side before Pecnik's late lifeline.

"It's always disappointing when you allow your rivals to score a goal at the very end but we can only blame only ourselves for it," said Hiddink.

"We had plenty of chances to increase our lead but missed them, while Slovenia converted one of their rare chances into a goal. But I believe we will score in the away match and clinch a place in the World Cup finals."

Slovenia coach Matjaz Kek said he was disappointed with the result but added his team still had a great chance to qualify for the finals.

"I'm unhappy with the result but it's better to be wounded than dead," Kek said.

Greece and Ukraine played out a 0-0 stalemate at Athens Olympic Stadium watched by 50,000 spectators with Greek striker Giorgos Samaras and Ukraine's Taras Mikhalik wasting second-half chances.

Greece coach Otto Rehhagel tried to take positives from the lacklustre match.

"When you can't win, the best result is not to let them score and this is what we did. The result also gives us chances in the second leg," he said.

Ukraine coach Alexei Mikhaichenko refused to accept that his team were favourites reach a second successive World Cup finals.

"The chances to qualify are equal for both teams. I don't know if we need to change our tactics. We will view the video of the match and then decide what needs to be done."

EUROPE PLAY-OFFS

At Moscow
Russia 2 (Bilyaletdinov 40, 51)
Slovenia 1 (Pecnik 88)
At Athens
Greece 0 Ukraine 0
At Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0 France 1 (Anelka 72)
At Lisbon
Portugal 1 (Alves 31) Bosnia Herzegovina 0
2nd legs: November 18

IN BRIEF

Bosnia promise Portugal hell

INTERNET, undated

"See you in Zenica," a front page headline said Sunday following Bosnia's "unfortunate" 1-0 defeat in Portugal in the first leg of World Cup qualifications play-off. "I never saw more misfortune," the national team coach, Croatia Miroslav Blazevic was quoted as saying in the newspaper, the Oslobođenje.

Virtually all local newspapers insist that Bosnia, with several clear shots at the Portuguese goal, was unlucky to lose.

"Fortune turned its back," was the headline in the mass-circulation Dnevni Avaz, while Nezavisne Novine said "luck was Portugal's ally."

Favourites Portugal, who finished fourth in the 2006 World Cup in Germany, will "face real hell" in the second leg of the play-off in Zenica on Wednesday, newspapers said.

A total of eight teams are battling for the four remaining European spots for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Press hail Egypt spirit

AFP, Cairo

Newspapers on Sunday feted Egypt's home team and their supporters after the Pharaohs beat Algeria's Desert Foxes in a crucial World Cup qualifier that avoided the violence that preceded the game.

"We achieved victory after having lost hope," Al-Gomhuriya government paper said in a front-page headline about the last-minute goal that earned Egypt a 2-0 victory and sparked wild celebrations on the streets of Cairo.

The result left the North African rivals level on points and goal difference at the top of Group C -- meaning they will meet again on Wednesday in Sudan to decide which country goes through to the finals in South Africa.

Saturday's tense game was marred by a violent attack the previous day on the bus carrying the Algerian team from the airport to their Cairo hotel.

Three players -- Khaled Lemmouchia, Rafik Halliche and Rafik Saifi -- were injured when stones were hurled at the bus, FIFA representative Walter Gagg said, adding that the injuries were not superficial.

Trouble flared again after the game when a group of Egyptian fans stoned buses ferrying Algerian fans away from the stadium, an AFP journalist said.

Three Algerians were lightly injured in the attack, security forces said. But Cairo newspapers ignored the violence and paid tribute to the players and their fans instead, hailing the latter as the real stars of the show.

"The fans were the stars of the game," trumpeted flagship government newspaper Al-Ahram.

"Thanks to the fans," the independent Al-Masri al-Yom said in a banner headline.



French forward Nicolas Anelka is jubilant after scoring the only goal of the game against Republic of Ireland in their World Cup 2010 play off at Croke Park Stadium in Dublin on Saturday.

Lugano gives Uruguay edge

AFP, San Jose



Uruguay took a step toward the 2010 World Cup Saturday as captain

Diego Lugano's first-half strike proved enough for a 1-0 victory in the first leg of their qualifying playoff against Costa Rica.

The second leg of the tie will be on Wednesday in Montevideo, where Costa Rica can expect to be hard pressed to turn things around.

But Costa Rica's Brazilian coach Rene Simoes insisted his players can win in Stadio Centenario.

"We have to believe in ourselves," Simoes said. "Why can't we win in Centenario?"

Uruguay are hoping to return to the global football showcase after failing to qualify in 2006.

Costa Rica, who have appeared in the last two World Cups, were less than 30 seconds from qualifying last month when they allowed Jonathan Bornstein's goal in injury time to give the United States a 2-2 draw at Washington.

That gave Honduras the third and final direct entry berth from the North and Central America and the Caribbean region.

Uruguay reached the play-off by finishing fifth in South American qualifying. In an often patchy first half, it was Uruguay who pressed the action forward.

Costa Rica, unable to challenge Uruguayan keeper Fernando Muslera, were unlucky in the 20th minute when injury forced defender Gilberto Martinez off after a collision with Alvaro Fernandez.

While he was receiving treatment, Uruguay took full advantage as Diego Forlan came close to scoring with a

center that crossed the face of the goal.

On the ensuing corner Forlan rose to head the ball. Costa Rica failed to clear the danger and Lugano seized upon the loose ball to slot it home in the 21st minute.

Costa Rica had a chance to equalize shortly before halftime, but Bryan Ruiz's header off Randall Azofeifa's cross went over the crossbar.

Costa Rica's efforts to find the equalizer were further hindered when they were reduced to 10 men in the 52nd minute when Azofeifa received his second yellow card.

Uruguay were unable to capitalize on their advantage, but neither could Costa Rica make their spirited efforts pay as attempts from Alvaro Saborio and Walter Centeno failed to really test Muslera.

Fernandez had a chance to add to Uruguay's lead with three minutes remaining, but his header was blocked by Junior Diaz.



Uruguay defender Diego Lugano (L) celebrates after scoring against Costa Rica during their World Cup 2010 play off match at the Ricardo Saprissa stadium in San Jose on Saturday.

Maradona in Zurich

Football

AFP, Zurich

Argentina coach Diego Maradona arrived Sunday in Zurich for a disciplinary hearing by world football's governing body FIFA over his sexually-explicit rant after his team's World Cup qualification.

The former star player was facing a possible fine and suspension from international matches after he rounded on critics during a press conference after Argentina qualified for next year's World Cup finals in South Africa.

Wearing sunglasses and tracksuit, a demonstrably impassive looking Maradona

kept silent as he was escorted through Zurich airport into a nearby hotel complex by an Argentine football official and bodyguards.

Maradona flew into the Swiss city from Madrid where Argentina lost 2-1 against Spain in a friendly late Saturday.

He was due to face a disciplinary hearing here at 2.00 pm (1300 GMT) behind closed doors. FIFA have declined to give details although they said they would release a statement afterwards.

Maradona's public outburst came after Argentina's 1-0 win over Uruguay in October, which allowed the two-time world champions to squeeze narrowly into next year's finals in South Africa

after a lowly and tense qualifying round.

At the time, the 48-year-old, a sporting icon in Argentina after skipping the 1986 World Cup winning team, told journalists to "suck it and keep sucking it".

FIFA chief Sepp Blatter has said Maradona may have flouted regulations which could result in a fine of up to 29,400 dollars and/or suspension.

"According to article 58.1 anyone who harms the dignity of a person through acts or words can be punished," he added.

Maradona later sought to make amends and admitted that if Argentina had failed to qualify he "would have taken myself off to Haiti."

Injury shocker for Van Persie

THE GUARDIAN

Arsenal are facing a major setback after reports in Holland claimed striker Robin van Persie has sustained serious ankle ligament damage while on international duty.

Van Persie was taken off on a stretcher just 15 minutes into Holland's friendly 0-0 draw against Italy after being brought down by Giorgio Chiellini while chasing a through ball. The tackle left Van Persie writhing in pain, grasping his right ankle.

Coach Bert van Marwijk said after the game: "The first diagnosis is a bad ankle injury. We are waiting for X-rays in hospital. It's terrible for Robin, and is not good for Holland or his club."

If the news is confirmed the injury could keep Van Persie, 26, sidelined for up to three months, and is a huge blow to Arsenal's title aspirations. So far this season he has scored seven league goals, helping them to second spot in the Premier League behind Chelsea.

Irish gloomy about prospect

AFP, Dublin

The Irish press were in a gloomy mood Sunday over the country's chances of World Cup qualification, the day after losing 1-0 to France in their first leg play-off at Croke Park.

A Nicolas Anelka goal, dubbed "the most unluckiest of deflections off the heel of Sean St Ledger" by the Sunday Independent, gave France a crucial win as the 1998 world champions and 2006 runners-up gained the upper-hand.

"It was heart-breaking," Ireland felt chance slip as French steal ahead, the newspaper estimated, adding that to reach the finals in South Africa next year they will need "to be clutching a magic wand" in Paris on Wednesday.

"The indications that Ireland felt they had blown their chance were clear when the two teams had to be separated at the final whistle."

The Irish Times estimated that France coach Raymond Domenech is "now holding all the aces" after "a cruel deflection made a tough job immeasurably harder."

"Now we must storm the Bastille next Wednesday," proclaimed the Sunday World tabloid.

"Ireland's World Cup hopes are hanging by a thread and in need of a fiery revolution of their own after being put to the sword on home soil."

Regretting an "unlucky" reversal, The Sunday Tribune believes the Irish can still take advantage of an apparent disunity among the France squad which the newspaper dubbed "Les Miserables".

"For all the talent of this French side, there is disharmony off the pitch under Raymond Domenech and disunity on it. If it stays that way, Ireland can overcome the odds."

Brazil the team to beat

AFP, Doha

Fabio Capello has identified Brazil as the side to beat at next year's World Cup after a second-string England were on the receiving end of what their Italian coach admitted had been a tough lesson.

The ease with which Brazil dominated Saturday's friendly was not fully reflected in the 1-0 victory earned by a superbly-taken header from Villarreal striker Nilmar.

Brazil never demonstrated the kind of gear changes that will be required to overcome the likes of Spain in South Africa next year. But a cautious England never required them to and Capello admitted he had been impressed.

"I learned a lot," he said. "This Brazil is a very good side, the strongest in the world now, I think."

"They are really good technically and fast but they are also really strong physically. Whenever they lose the ball, they win it back very quickly. It is very difficult to find the space to play against them."

Brazil coach Dunga was reluctant to accept the tag of World Cup favourites that Capello wanted to bestow on his side.



Spain midfielder Xabi Alonso (C) celebrates his second goal against Argentina during their friendly clash at Vicente Calderon in Madrid on Saturday.

Xabi slays Argentina

Nilmar strike hurts England

Football

AFP, Paris

Xabi Alonso emerged as the two-goal hero as Spain downed Argentina while England came up short against five-time world champions Brazil in World Cup warm-ups on Saturday.

On a packed programme of international friendlies Italy and the Netherlands drew a blank in Pescara while there was mixed fortune for two other World Cup qualifiers.

Serbia, who topped their qualifying group to consign 2006 beaten finalists France to the play-offs, scraped a 1-0 win in Northern Ireland but Switzerland were defeated by the same scoreline by Norway.

World Cup hosts South Africa were held to a goalless draw by Japan, while the United States were felled 1-0 by Slovakia.

In Doha an injury-hit England received a World Cup reality check after coming up short against Brazil, the 1-0 scoreline in Doha flattering Fabio Capello's side.

Capello had to make do without first team regulars John Terry, Rio Ferdinand, Ashley Cole, Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard, and his wounded Three Lions were tamed by Nilmar's second half header.

Dunga's Brazil could have won by more but Luis Fabiano missed a penalty after Wes Brown's mistake forced keeper Ben Foster to foul the striker.

Capello though was putting a brave face on

this only his fourth defeat since taking over the England reins.

The Italian reflected: "I found some positives. I checked some players in this important game against the best team in the world."

"I learned the value of some players when playing against this team. But I don't like to speak about individual players."

"They (Brazil) are a really good team but my first eleven will be better."

First time captain Wayne Rooney remarked: "I'm disappointed with the result. We are better than we showed here."

"We are looking to improve. Thankfully it is only a friendly and we will move on."

In Madrid Xabi struck in either half to fire Euro 2008 champions Spain to a 2-1 win over Argentina.

Real Madrid's star put one of the favourites for next year's World Cup into a 16th minute lead, the midfielder stabbing home a rebound after Argentina goalkeeper Sergio Romero could only parry away a shot from David Silva.

Argentina levelled through a Lionel Messi penalty on the hour mark but Xabi's 86th minute spot kick ensured Spain the bragging rights over Diego Maradona's side.

"I think we were the better side in the second half but their penalty ruined all of our good work," said Maradona, who faces a FIFA panel on Sunday in Zurich to explain his foul-mouthed outburst at journalists after his team secured World Cup qualification in October.

"I am going there to be heard and nothing more," he said.



Brazil striker Nilmar (C) gets beyond England's Matthew Upson to head home during their friendly football match at the Khalifa Stadium in Doha on Saturday.