

France take crucial lead

AFP, Paris



France closed 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-offs.

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 Senjad Ibricevic 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 Ibrahimovic'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 Pečnik'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 Pečnik'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 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 Mikhalkov 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 Mikhailichenko refused to accept that his team were favourites to 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 (Pečnik 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



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 let 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 immediately 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-timed 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.

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PHOTO: AFP

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

Nilmari 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 flattening 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 Nilmari'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 Argentine 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.

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.

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