

England, Argentina post narrow wins

Football

AFP, Paris

Embattled England and Argentina began their post-World Cup recoveries with morale-boosting wins on Wednesday, but new-look France slumped to defeat with a team purged of their South Africa rebels.

England, playing for the first time since their 4-1 defeat to Germany in the World Cup second round, came back to defeat Hungary 2-1 with captain Steven Gerrard scoring two fine goals.

Argentina, beaten by the Germans in the quarterfinals in South Africa, shrugged off the controversy surrounding the sacking of Diego Maradona to beat Ireland 1-0.

Meanwhile, Laurent Blanc's reign as France coach began with a 2-1 defeat to Norway, but he fielded a new-look French side in Oslo with all members of the disgraced World Cup squad suspended.

Elsewhere, World Cup runners-up Holland put out a second-string side in Donetsk and drew 1-1 with Ukraine while Germany, semi-finalists in South Africa, also used a back-up team and drew 2-2 in Denmark.

At Wembley, Gerrard helped Fabio Capello avoid more embarrassment after Phil Jagielka had put through his own goal to give Hungary a shock lead although there were doubts over whether or not the ball had crossed the line.

Liverpool star Gerrard then hit two goals in the space of four minutes to give some respite to Capello on a day when the Italian called time on David Beckham's international career.

Argentina, with Lionel Messi receiving warm applause, began the post-Maradona era with a hard fought victory over Ireland at a

refurbished Lansdowne Road stadium in Dublin.

Angel Di Maria's first half strike consigned Giovanni Trapattoni's men to defeat in the first international game in the renamed Aviva Stadium.

The Real Madrid striker's first half goal gave caretaker coach Sergio Batista the perfect start in charge of the Albicelestes in front of 45,200 fans.

Trapattoni missed the match as he recovered in hospital after minor abdominal surgery while Robbie Keane made his 100th appearance for Ireland.

Blanc insisted that he was pleased with his inexperienced France team, which included eight new caps, in spite of their 2-1 defeat in Norway.

Hatem Ben Arfa put France ahead shortly after half-time but two goals from Erik Huseklepp, taking advantage of French errors, took the hosts to victory.

Danish substitute Mads Junker inspired Denmark to come from 2-0 down to force a 2-2 draw against Germany in Copenhagen.

Junker created one for veteran Dennis Rommedahl and scored the leveller four minutes from time after Germany had gone 2-0 up through Mario Gomez and Patrick Helmes.

Germany fielded a side made up of bit-part players from the team that finished third at the World Cup and others who didn't make the trip to South Africa.

The Dutch too put out a second-string team in Ukraine.

PSV Eindhoven midfielder Jeremain Lens put the Dutch side in front in the second half, while Lokomotiv Moscow midfielder Alexander Aliev pulled the scores level just a minutelater.

Poulsen joins L'pool

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool have completed the signing of Juventus midfielder Christian Poulsen, paving the way for the possible departure of Argentina captain Javier Mascherano.

Poulsen, a 30-year-old Denmark international, has joined the Reds on a three-year deal for an initial fee of 4.5 million pounds (5.4 million euros), payable in two instalments.

Juventus will receive a further one million pounds (1.21 million euros) depending on certain conditions.

Poulsen links up with Liverpool manager Roy Hodgson for a second time, having been signed by him first time around for FC Copenhagen in 2000.

A statement on Liverpool's website, www.liverpoolfc.tv, said: "Liverpool FC are delighted to confirm the signing of Christian Poulsen after the midfielder put pen to paper on a three-year deal.

"The 30-year-old, who has been capped 77 times by Denmark, arrives from Italian giants Juventus and will wear the No.28 shirt.

"Poulsen has previously worked with Roy Hodgson at FC Copenhagen, where he was given his first big break by the current Reds boss."

Juventus had earlier announced a fee had been agreed in a statement which said: "Juventus Football Club can announce that it has completed the agreement with Liverpool FC for the outright transfer of Christian Poulsen for a fee of 5.475 million euros payable in two instalments.

"The fee will further increase by up to 1.2 million euros depending on his achievements during the contract period."

Poulsen's arrival could be the first step in the eventual departure of combative midfielder Mascherano, who asked Hodgson for a transfer on the day he returned to pre-season training after an extended break following the World Cup.

Mascherano is keen to be reunited with former Reds boss Rafael Benitez at Inter Milan, although the Serie A club appear unwilling to meet Liverpool's 25 million pounds (30.4 million euros) valuation.

Barcelona, who tried to sign Mascherano 12 months ago, are also believed to be interested in the 26-year-old having failed in their bid to sign Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas.



England captain Steven Gerrard (R) is ecstatic after scoring his first goal against Hungary during their international friendly at the Wembley on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ballack wants to stay captain

AFP, Berlin

Michael Ballack claimed on Thursday that Germany coach Joachim Loew had assured him he would be captain of the national side when he returned from injury.

The 33-year-old Ballack captained Germany 55 times in his 98 internationals until an injury in the English FA Cup final in May while playing for Chelsea ruled him out of the World Cup finals in South Africa.

Philipp Lahm, who took over the armband and led Germany to third place in the finals, has since declared that he wants to remain as captain.

"When the question of the captaincy came up during the tournament I waited until the end of the competition to call 'Jogi' Loew," Ballack told German news agency SID.

"And the coach then assured me that I should not have any concerns and that I should just stay calm."

Ballack is now back in training with new club Bayer Leverkusen but neither he nor Lahm took part in Wednesday's friendly against Denmark which ended in a 2-2 draw.

Senderos undergoes surgery

AFP, Geneva

Fulham defender Philippe Senderos has had an operation on his ruptured Achilles tendon in Finland in a bid to speed up his recovery, his father told a Swiss newspaper on Thursday.

"He called me as soon as he came out of the operating room. He was anxious before the operation. But everything went well," Julian Senderos told the Tribune de Geneve after surgery late Wednesday.

Senderos said the Finnish clinic was also used by David Beckham after he injured his Achilles tendon while playing for Milan last March.

"Philippe is obviously really downcast. He really wanted to get back to his best form, to get involved at Fulham, and with Switzerland as well. It's not easy to accept," he added.

The 25-year-old former Arsenal player, who moved to Craven Cottage in June, was injured while training in London after withdrawing from the Switzerland squad that beat Austria on Wednesday.

The injury leaves Fulham's new coach Mark Hughes with only two fit recognised centre-halves for six months, with the new English Premier League season due to kick off on Saturday.

De Rossi worried about Italy

Football

AFP, Rome

Following seven games without a win, no victories in 2010 and their dismal showing at the World Cup, Daniele De Rossi admitted that Italian football is in crisis.

A new-look Italy began the Cesare Prandelli era with a 1-0 defeat to Ivory Coast in London on Tuesday night as the new boss began where the previous coach -- Marcello Lippi -- had left off, with defeat.

There were five debutants in Prandelli's first Italy selection including Mario Balotelli, then a teenager but who turned 20 on Thursday.

Prandelli's formation was seen by many as an anti-Lippi team with the former Fiorentina coach going for an attacking line-up full of youth and energy, having consigned most of the remaining veterans from Italy's 2006 World Cup victory to the scrap heap.

But while the then-holders' World Cup campaign -- in which they finished bottom of a group containing New Zealand, Slovakia and Paraguay -- did not provoke any talk of crisis, this latest set-back finally has.

"Now we're all saying it, Italian football is in crisis," said De Rossi. "It's hard (to imagine) that (good) Italian footballers are finished but we have to look for them, find them, wait for them and not criticise them after the first mistake."

De Rossi's sentiments at least confirm what Lippi had denied in South Africa, even following the humiliating 0-0 draw with part-timers New Zealand and ahead of the humbling 3-2 defeat to Slovakia.

"There's no crisis and there's no need for a crisis," had said Lippi before his team limped meekly out of the competition.

The stats, however, don't lie and this is one of the worst ever series of results by an Italian national team.

Seven games without a win, and none of those precious victories in 2010, only once

have Italy had to wait longer to end such a run.

Between 1958 and 1959, the only time when Italy missed out on World Cup qualification, the team went eight games without a success: three defeats and five draws.

The current team have lost three and drawn four of their last seven, matching the winless streak of 1910-11.

But De Rossi believes it's not all doom and gloom and said that there is still hope ahead of the European Championships in 2012.

"Yes, it's been a horrible year," added De Rossi. "Losing always hurts and even more so if it comes after other defeats, likewise for the criticisms."

"But the defeats in June were of another kind, this time it went badly against a team that was physically intimidating and we did some good things."

"It's too early to make a drama, we all need to understand that this is just the 'good morning' of a new era. There's two more years before a judgement should be made."

De Rossi also insisted that the players need a bit more time to get up to full match fitness and bluntly pointed out that given their early group games in Euro qualification, there is little to get worried about.

"I'm not despairing, our condition will improve and also, even if we're not at 100 per cent, it should be enough given our opponents," he said.

De Rossi may have a point there given their first three opponents are Estonia, Faroe Islands and Northern Ireland, three teams they should be able to beat with their reserves.

But many would have said that of New Zealand as well. In fact, Northern Ireland are only five places below the All Whites in the official FIFA standings, and that only because New Zealand moved up a long way following their three draws in three group games with higher ranked teams in South Africa.

Having acknowledged the country's crisis, it would be foolhardy to forget so soon and revert to the nonchalance that cost Italy so dear at the World Cup.



Argentina winger Angel Di Maria (C) celebrates his all-important goal with teammate Lionel Messi (R) during their international friendly against Ireland at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi backs Batista

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Interim Argentina coach Sergio Batista felt the warmth of a healthy pat on the back from striker Lionel Messi after leading the side to a 1-0 friendly win over Ireland in his first game in charge on Wednesday.

Batista has expressed his desire to retain the job on a full-time basis through to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, not just for the rest of the year, and his cause will be helped by Messi's glowing assessment of the former central midfielder.

"We've got to let him get on with the job. I had him at the Olympic Games (in 2008) and I get on very well with him. Today he's the one and we regard him as the national team coach, not a stand-in," Messi told reporters.

The narrow win in Dublin was exactly the kind of result Batista was hoping for ahead of a more demanding home match against world champions Spain in Buenos Aires early next month.

Messi was happy in an Argentina shirt in Beijing two years ago when he inspired his country to a second successive soccer gold medal and the Barcelona forward admitted he felt similarly as comfortable on Wednesday.

"I liked how we played, it's the same system we use in my club, the same game. I felt comfortable because that's how I play with Barcelona," Messi told iTyC Sport, who broadcast the match to Argentina.

Messi found himself increasingly isolated in former coach Diego Maradona's side at this year's World Cup as Argentina progressively came up against tougher opponents and cut a forlorn figure when they lost 4-0 to Germany in the quarter-finals.

"Checho" Batista, a bearded commanding defensive midfielder in the 1986 World Cup-winning side, fielded a balanced midfield with plenty of back-up for captain Javier Mascherano from Fernando Gago, overlooked for South Africa, and Ever Banega.

All three were in Batista's Olympic team, along with Wednesday's scorer Angel Di Maria and the recalled fullback Pablo Zabaleta.

"We played very well, I liked the first half a lot," Batista told reporters. "After a (prior) 30-minute practice, I'm happy because the lads had possession and respect for the ball. They got the message right away."

The confident Batista believes in his chances of getting the job, saying in a recent interview with the sports daily Ole: "I hope everything is taken into account, what I did at the Olympic Games and the work with the national juniors."

Batista also gets on with Carlos Bilardo, the 1986 and 1990 World Cup coach now the Argentine Football Association's technical director, who was often at loggerheads with Maradona.

How the friendlies go against Spain next month and then Brazil could ultimately decide his fate but Batista said: "I don't feel like an interim (coach), I'm going to work as if I were the man, with a contract until 2014."

Vieira ready to fight for City place

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City midfielder Patrick Vieira insisted Thursday he is not daunted by the rich array of talent at Eastlands that could limit his chances of first team football this season.

The 33-year-old former France captain moved to Manchester from Inter Milan in January but injury restricted him to just nine appearances as Roberto Mancini's side finished in fifth place in the Premier League, just missing out on this year's Champions League.

Mancini now has four holding midfielders he can call upon, including England's Gareth Barry, new signing Yaya Toure and Dutch World Cup finalist Nigel de Jong.

But Vieira says he is ready to give everything in training to show he deserves to be in the starting line-up.

"I still have the desire and determination to do well and I strongly believe that if every player gives 100 per cent commitment to the football club it will be an exciting season for us," Vieira told reporters here.

"I leave picking the team up to the manager. Every day, every single player will try to show the manager that he wants to play and after that he will pick the eleven that start."

"But if we want to do well in the league and the Europa Cup, and the national cups, it will be all of the 25 players who make a difference. If every single player understands that this squad will go really far."

'Journalists pick on me'

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan striker Mario Balotelli complained on Wednesday that journalists are the cause of his troubles, the most recent of which was a police ticking-off for firing a toy gun in public.

The Manchester City target is a controversial figure in Italian football and last season fell out of favour with his then-Inter boss Jose Mourinho for his poor discipline.

He also angered his own fans after throwing his jersey on the floor following a Champions League semifinal clash against Barcelona, in which he was jeered.

He didn't help his cause either being photographed wearing an AC Milan shirt in a bar.

But following his debut for the full Italian national team in Tuesday's 1-0 defeat in London against Ivory Coast, the forward of Ghanaian descent pointed his finger at the press.

"At 20 years of age you can't be a complete man, at 20 you're starting to mature," he told Sky Sport Italia.

"It's difficult but when you start doing this sport you know that you could become famous and you have to be ready."

"With me (journalists) are always looking for a scoop."

"When I shot a pistol I did something stupid but then journalists blow everything out of proportion."

Diego's salary key to Wolves move

AFP, Berlin

Former Bundesliga champions Wolfsburg are set to stretch their salary budget in a bid to sign Brazilian playmaker Diego, reports said Thursday.

Bild newspaper said the 2009 German league champions have already agreed on a 17 million transfer fee with Juventus for Diego, one million less than the Italian club's asking price.

However the report added the deal could falter if Wolfsburg fail to meet Diego's pay demands. Diego's father, who is also his agent, was set to arrive in Turin Thursday for negotiations with representatives from Wolfsburg.

The German Bundesliga is not unfamiliar to Diego, who played three seasons with Werder Bremen in 2006-2009. The Brazilian failed to light up the Serie A in his first season in Italy with Juventus.

Wolfsburg, who finished eighth in the league last season, are aiming for an improved result in the coming season under the helm of former England manager Steve McClaren.



Real Madrid's new signing Portuguese defender Ricardo Carvalho (R) gives a press conference at Santiago Bernabeu yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP