



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi celebrates his first goal against Switzerland during their international friendly in Bern on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi scores 1st int'l hattrick

Football

REUTERS, Berne

Lionel Messi has long had to contend with the criticism that he saves his best for Barcelona but his first hat-trick for Argentina proved a perfect riposte against those who doubted his international credentials.

"I had been waiting for a long time for this moment because on a lot of occasions things didn't work out for me," he told Argentine television after Wednesday's 3-1 win over Switzerland.

"Now, things have worked out, the team won and we did well. It's special because it happened with the national team."

Failure to score at the 2010 World Cup or last year's Copa America had baffled observers, with some questioning his commitment and others making him a scapegoat for the team's failings, even under the eccentric leadership of Diego Maradona.

Three times World Player of the Year, Messi has won all his major honours - five Spanish league titles, three Champions League and two Club World Cup titles - with Barcelona.

At international level, he has been restricted to two age-level titles, the world under-20 championship in 2005 and the Olympic Games gold

medal in 2008.

"I've said on a lot of occasions that we can't compare with Barcelona, they are two different things, but it's also the case the national team has great players capable of playing great games," Messi said.

"I've known the Kun (Sergio Aguero) for a long time and the same goes for Pipita (Gonzalo Higuain), it's easy to strike up an understanding with them on the pitch and we have a good relationship off it, which is also important."

"There is still a big margin for improvement, we just have to continue like this."

Coach Alejandro Sabella, who was in charge for his tenth international after replacing Sergio Batista following the Copa America, had nothing but praise for Messi, saying it was a "blessing" for Argentina to have him in the side.

"Messi nearly always plays well, recently he has played some excellent games," he told reporters. "We have to shelter him and we all have to help him, players and technical staff."

"The fact that he didn't score doesn't mean that he didn't play well at the last World Cup. He set up several goals and created a lot of chances. Sometimes, the ball goes in and sometimes it doesn't."

Huntelaar, Smalling in hospital

REUTERS, London

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar and England's Chris Smalling both ended up in hospital after clashing heads when the Dutchman scored the second goal in a 3-2 friendly win for the Netherlands on Wednesday.

Huntelaar netted with a powerful header into the roof of the net after 59 minutes but smashed into Smalling, who went up for the same ball.

The two lay on the Wembley pitch for some time before Smalling was carried away on a stretcher and Schalke 04 striker Huntelaar walked off holding a bandage to his face.

Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk told reporters: "Huntelaar has gone to hospital because we think he has some damage there (to his head) but we don't know for sure."

"He looked better in the dressing room than on the pitch, but we have decided to have him checked out."

England's interim coach Stuart Pearce said Manchester United defender Smalling had also gone for a checkup.

"Chris went to hospital. I spoke with him and he was conscious, but he split his head open. Our thoughts are with him and I am hoping that he will be fine."

Dutch, French gain boost

Football

AFP, Paris

Holland and France gained significant psychological boosts with 100 days to go to the Euro 2012 finals as they beat England and Germany away in their respective friendlies on Wednesday.

The Dutch - European champions in 1988 - edged a vastly-less experienced England 3-2 at Wembley thanks to a double by Arjen Robben while the French - champions in 2000 - beat Germany 2-1 in Bremen.

Elsewhere David Silva's first goal of the year and a hat-trick by Roberto Soldado helped defending champions Spain to a 5-0 win over Copa American semi-finalists Venezuela while Sebastian Larsson's double was instrumental in an impressive 3-1 win for Sweden over fellow Euro 2012 finalists Croatia.

Another European heavyweight Italy slipped-up as they lost 1-0 at home to the Jurgen Klinsmann coached United States, Clint Dempsey getting the goal to give them their fourth successive win.

The Republic of Ireland also showed they will be no pushovers at their first Euro finals since the 1988 edition as they fought back to draw 1-1 with fellow qualifiers the Czech Republic in Dublin.

Milan Baros, a veteran of the outstanding Czech side that reached the Euro 2004 semi-finals, put the visitors ahead before Simon Cox levelled late in

the second-half.

Sadly there was to be no resounding tribute to the late Wales coach Gary Speed as the Welsh lost 1-0 to Costa Rica in his memorial match.

England - who lost captain John Terry and coach Fabio Capello in the past month the former being stripped of the captaincy by the Football Association (FA) and the latter walking out because of that decision - were hit by two goals in a minute in the second-half.

RESULTS

Spain 5 (Iniesta 37, Silva 41, Soldado 49, 52, 83)
Venezuela 0
England 2 (Cahill 85, Young 90) **Holland 3**
(Robben 57, 90+2, Huntelaar 58)
Republic of Ireland 1 (Cox 86) Czech Republic 1
(Baros 50)
Italy 0 **United States 1** (Dempsey 55)
Germany 1 (Cacau 90+1) **France 2** (Giroud 21,
Malouda 69)
Poland 0 Portugal 0
Croatia 1 (Olsson 44-og) **Sweden 3** (Ibrahimovic
13-pen, Larsson 46, 69)
Denmark 0 **Russia 2** (Shirokov 4, Arshavin 45)
Wales 0 **Costa Rica 1** (Campbell 7)

However, they fought back to level it in the late stages only for Robben to win it in time added on.

England caretaker coach Stuart Pearce said that at least the game had proved useful in terms of learning things both for him and the players against a side that reached the World Cup final only two years ago.

"Maybe there was a lack of belief, which is something we have got to get into the squad going forward," said

Pearce, who is Under-21 coach and due to coach the Great Britain team at the Olympics later this year.

"In the end we were a bit disappointed to lose the game, but we've learnt a lot and learned a bit about the individuals for the summer and that was always the intention for tonight."

Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk meanwhile praised his side's performance as they banished the memory of their last international, a 3-0 defeat to Germany.

"We lost against Germany on the counter-attack and we didn't want to lose on counter attack here...you have to defend against England as they have a lot of very fast players and that's a weapon."

"But we were happy to play our football, and the pitch was unbelievably good," he added.

Goals by Olivier Giroud and Florent Malouda inflicted the first defeat on Germany since they were beaten by the same margin by Australia last March.

Germany's Brazil-born striker Cacau scored a late consolation for the hosts, but the French deserved the win.

It was a disciplined performance from France who open their Euro 2012 campaign against England in Donetsk on June 11 and Laurent Blanc's side dominated a weakened German team lacking five first-choice players.

Italy's lack of a potent striker - coach Cesare Prandelli has lost Antonio Cassano and Giuseppe Rossi to injury and dropped Mario Balotelli for his poor conduct on the pitch - cost them against the Americans.

Loss annoys Loew

Football

AFP, Bremen

Germany boss Joachim Loew admitted he was annoyed by his team's performance in their 2-1 friendly defeat to France, while French coach Laurent Blanc hailed his side's disciplined display.

"We have been criticised for not playing as a team, but tonight we showed remarkable team spirit. This narrows things down for Euro places," said Blanc.

A first-half goal by France's Olivier Giroud, who then set up substitute Florent Malouda for the second, inflicted Germany's first defeat in 11 games since they lost by the same margin to Australia last March.

Germany's Brazil-born striker Cacau scored a late consolation for the hosts, but Loew admitted the French deserved the win.

"When you lose a game, you are annoyed, but I am more annoyed about the manner in which we lost," said a visibly disgruntled Loew.

"In the course of the game, France were considerably better than us."

"We never found our game, which is why it was deserved that France won."

"We were fairly solid in the first half, but we lost our rhythm in the second and the French got stronger as the game wore on."

Germany were missing five stars in captain Philipp Lahm, his deputy Bastian Schweinsteiger, midfielders Mario Goetze and Lukas Podolski, plus defender Per Mertesacker with injury and the replacements failed to cope with the French.

Loew had repeatedly stated the result would not rattle German confidence in their

quest to win a fourth European title in Poland and the Ukraine this June, but the lack of discipline in defence was a concern.

"The basis in the team is still good," he said.

"We have achieved a lot and progressed as a group, but this result shows we still have things to work on."

Bayern Munich midfielder Thomas Mueller hinted at disharmony in the ranks as the German defence was badly exposed on occasion.

"After such a performance, you can't really say a lot," he said.

"It was a bit undisciplined in the second half, we had a bit of a split team and we left the defence to get on with it."

In contrast, France were pragmatic and took their chances as their attack found plenty of space to exploit in the hosts' defence.

Having claimed Germany's scalp, Blanc was quick to play down over-confidence with France set to face England, co-hosts the Ukraine and Sweden in Group D at Euro 2012.

"By May, much can change," he said.

"I told the players to stay fit and healthy."

"Victories is better than building up trust and confidence."

"It is better to win in Germany than be dominated, but the impact of this result stops there."

After the debacle at the last World Cup, France are showing signs of returning to form with a trio of friendlies still to come before the Euro and Blanc said he was as pleased with the performance as much as the result.

"I dare say both, but it was a good game of football," he said.

Robben warns England

Football

AFP, London

Arjen Robben warned the Football Association they must make a quick decision over the next England manager after his brilliant double fired the Netherlands to a 3-2 friendly win at Wembley.

Robben's superb solo effort opened the scoring for the Dutch in Wednesday's friendly and his majestic strike in stoppage time condemned England to their first defeat since November 2010 after Stuart Pearce's side had fought back from two goals down.

England caretaker manager Pearce hardly boosted his credentials to replace Fabio Capello, who resigned last month, with a disjointed display, but the FA board are still no closer to appointing a successor to the Italian.

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp remains the favourite for the job and, with only four months before England travel to Poland and the Ukraine for Euro 2012, Bayern Munich winger Robben believes the FA need to get their new boss in place soon so he has time to get his plans in place.

"There is always some excitement and drama with England," Robben said. "Of course it is very important (for the manager) to work with a team and build on it."

"I think quite a few players were missing (against the Netherlands). They have great potential. They have great individual players."

Some are beginning to doubt the quality of England's players and point to the poor showing in the Champions League this season.

But Robben doesn't agree. "I think it is still a strong league and I had a great time here," he said.



Dutch winger Arjen Robben (C) scores the opening goal against England during their international friendly at the Wembley on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Which youngster has impressed you the most in the BPL?

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ESPN & STAR Cricket

Australia v Sri Lanka
Tri-Series Match



Premier League

Sk Russel v Brothers Union

Time: 3:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National