



Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic celebrates his opening goal during their international friendly against England in Stockholm on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

France conquer Italy

Football

AFP, Paris

Zlatan Ibrahimovic lit up a night of friendlies most club coaches had castigated as an unnecessary intrusion into their domestic campaigns as the Swedish star scored four times to give his side a 4-2 win over England on Wednesday.

There was also further evidence France's 1998 World Cup winning captain Didier Deschamps was having a dynamic effect on the present French team as they followed up their impressive 1-1 draw against world and European champions Spain in a World Cup qualifier last month with a 2-1 win over Euro 2012 finalists Italy in Parma.

Elsewhere two Euro 2012 semifinalists Germany and Portugal had to settle for draws - the Germans drawing 0-0 with arch-rivals the Netherlands in Amsterdam and the Portuguese, playing without the absent Cristiano Ronaldo, held 2-2 by Gabon.

Ireland manager Giovanni Trapattoni too won't be feeling too comfortable as his side slumped to a 1-0 home defeat by Greece - their second successive home reverse following the 6-1 humiliation by Germany in a World Cup qualifier last month.

Scotland are looking for a new manager and while they gained a welcome win in caretaker manager Billy Stark's first game in charge since Craig Levein was relieved of his duties, a 2-1 away win over minnows Luxembourg won't have his paymasters rushing to sign him up on a permanent basis.

Ibrahimovic at his very best is unstoppable and he decided that the inaugura-

tion of the new national stadium, the Friends Arena, was a suitably grand occasion for him to produce a masterclass and in doing so inflict England manager Roy Hodgson's first defeat over 90 minutes in 12 games.

Ibrahimovic, who rose to fourth in the all-time Swedish scoring list, saved his most spectacular goal for last, an outrageous long-range bicycle kick in injury time that drew a standing ovation from the Sweden dug-out.

France - whom Deschamps took over as coach after his fellow World Cup winning team-mate Laurent Blanc stepped down after they went out in the last eight of Euro 2012 - may have beaten a far from full strength Italy side but it left their coach a very happy man.

"The result is important isn't it? We have just recently drawn with Spain and here we have beaten the Euro 2012 finalists. That is quite something."

"I am proud both of the players mental attitude and the spirit they showed."

His Italy counterpart Cesare Prandelli was far from disheartened at what was the side's fifth successive friendly defeat.

"I'd rather lose this match tonight and see the team making some progress than walk away with a win and see nothing," he said.

The Germans took consolation out of their drab draw with the Dutch for not having conceded any goals, having come into the game after a 4-4 draw at home to the Swedes in their World Cup qualifier last month.

"For me, this game was positive," said German coach Joachim Loew.

"We had a changed team, with many regulars missing, but we kept our shape and discipline, that was important after the last game against Sweden."

Russia, USA share spoils

AFP, Moscow

Fabio Capello extended his unbeaten run as Russia coach on Wednesday, as his side drew 2-2 with the United States in a friendly in Krasnodar.

Anzhi Makhachkala forward Fedor Smolov and Zenit St Petersburg midfielder Roman Shirokov both scored for the home side, while midfielders Michael Bradley and Mikkel Deskerud were on target for the visitors.

The hosts started in a lively fashion pinning back the Americans, who were weakened with the absence of Tottenham Hotspur's Clint Dempsey and Langdon Donovan of LA Galaxy, from the kick-off.

Smolov put Russia 1-0 up in the ninth minute, giving US goalkeeper Tim Howard of English Premier League side Everton no chance from close range after a mix-up in defence.

Bradley, of Serie A outfit Roma, however, levelled in the 76th minute with a volley from outside the box, which struck the left-hand post and ricocheted into the net, after being fed with a header by teammate Josmer Altidore.

Colombia hold Brazil

Football

REUTERS, East Rutherford

Neymar conjured up a superb equaliser and a dreadful penalty miss in a pulsating 1-1 draw between 2014 World Cup hosts Brazil and Colombia in their friendly on Wednesday.

Juan Cuadrado gave Colombia the lead just before halftime, Neymar levelled in the second half but was left red-faced after sending his penalty kick flying several metres over the crossbar in the 80th minute with a complete mis-kick.

In doing so, he denied Brazil their seventh successive win in a match played at a breakneck pace.

Colombia striker Radamel Falcao, like Neymar one of the world's most sought-after players, had a quiet game, although it was another impressive performance from his side who have flourished under the leadership of Argentine Jose Pekerman.

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) claimed the match was the 1,000th played by their team, although it did not provide a complete list of games which caused confusion about the criteria used.

However, it was clear that the tally included non-international matches as the CBF said the first game was against

English club side Exeter City in 1914, when the Brazil team consisted only of players from Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Brazil had the first opening when Neymar got away to meet Daniel Alves's cross but his effort went straight at goalkeeper David Ospina, who managed to block it from six metres.

Kaka hit the crossbar and Neymar fired over in a brief period of Brazilian dominance before Colombia went ahead one minute before the break.

After a long period of possession, James Rodriguez set Cuadrado clear on the right and the Fiorentina player scored with a low shot into the far corner which Diego Alves got a hand to but could not stop.

Neymar pulled an equaliser out of the hat in the 64th minute as he broke down the left, looking as if he would go outside his marker, but then dragged the ball back and shot between two defenders into the far corner.

Falcao nearly got on the scoresheet two minutes later with a diving header which was brilliantly saved by Diego Alves, who also did well to stop a James Rodriguez shot afterwards.

Neymar, who has 17 goals in 26 internationals, curled a free kick centimetres wide before nearly sending the ball out of the stadium with his duffed penalty.

Messi draws a blank

Football

APP, Riyadh

Lionel Messi drew a rare blank on Wednesday as Argentina could only labour to a goalless draw with Saudi Arabia in a friendly here.

Messi's two goals for Barcelona in a weekend win over Real Mallorca gave the maestro 76 goals for 2012 to date, beating Pele's tally of 75 from 1958 and taking him to within nine of Gerd Mueller's all time record total of 85 set in 1972.

But he missed a chance to close down the deficit on Mueller as the Argentinians plodded to a stalemate in a match short on inspiration or major incident.

Messi thus also failed to move ahead of his 12 goals for the year in his national shirt - a goal here would have taken him beyond the 12 he shares with Gabriel Batistuta.

The Saudis, ranked 112 in the FIFA listings, could even have caused embar-

rassment to their illustrious visitors - only an offside decision robbed the hosts of a goal when Osama Al Harbi had an effort chalked off on 29 minutes.

Earlier, Mohammad Al Sahlawi had sent an effort whizzing just wide of keeper Sergio Romero's goal.

At the other end, Manchester City's Sergio Aguero might have earned a penalty but was judged to have been fouled just outside the area.

Just after the hour mark, Aguero slipped down the right and whipped in a cross which Messi just failed to connect with.

Then Yasir Al Shahrani robbed Messi as he prepared to shoot from just inside the box.

Argentina will now turn their focus back to the business of qualifying for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil - the group leaders' next qualifier is against Venezuela on March 22 before they head up to the high altitude of La Paz to face makeweights Bolivia four days later.



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina superstar Lionel Messi (R) is challenged by Saudi Arabia defender Motaz al-Musa during their international friendly at the King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh on Wednesday.

Ibrahimovic masterclass

Football

AFP, Stockholm

Zlatan Ibrahimovic drew praise from every corner after he scored all four goals -- including a jaw-dropping long-range bicycle kick -- in Sweden's 4-2 friendly win over England.

Ibrahimovic's 20th-minute opener on Wednesday made him the first player to score at Stockholm's Friends Arena, but England threatened to spoil the party by pulling ahead through Danny Welbeck and Steven Caulker.

Unfortunately for Roy Hodgson's side, it proved nothing but the cue for Ibrahimovic to take matters into his own hands.

After chesting down Anders Svensson's pass and volleying home a 77th-minute equaliser, he put Sweden ahead with a 30-yard free-kick and then served up the piece de resistance with an extraordinary fourth goal in injury time.

England goalkeeper Joe Hart was drawn from his goal by a long ball but he could not get enough distance on his clearing header and Ibrahimovic capitalised to send an incredible bicycle kick into the unguarded net from 25 yards.

"When I got the long ball, I saw the goalkeeper come out, and I thought, 'Should I go in for the duel, or wait for him to put it out?'" the Sweden captain told reporters.

"When he put it out, I had it in my mind to score -- to try to score. I tried to put it in the goal and when I was on the ground, I saw a defender trying to get it, but it went in."

What to WATCH

Channel 9

Bangladesh v West Indies

First Test, Day 4

Live from 9:30am

STAR Cricket

India v England

First Test, Day 2

Live from 10:00am

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v West Indies

First Test, Day 4

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National

Stadium, Mirpur

National Cricket League

(Four-day match, Day 1)

Rajshahi v Chittagong

Venue: Sylhet Divisional Stadium

Khulna v Dhaka Metro

Venue: Shaheed Chandu Stgadium,

Bogra

Sylhet v Barisal

Venue: Barisal Divisional Stadium

Dhaka v Rangpur

Venue: BKSP

Bangladesh Premier League

Muktijoddha v Arambagh

Time: 3:00pm

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11am-6pm

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