

DAVID BECKHAM: Premiership Player of the Week

**By Graham Lister, Chief Football Correspondent,
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division**

England's most celebrated footballer has just enjoyed the best two weeks of his career. Already a superstar idolised by millions, David Beckham cemented his position among the world's best with a series of displays that demonstrated his sublime technical ability, underlined his immense contribution to his team, and confirmed his stature as a captain of growing maturity who leads by supreme example.

Beckham's fabulous fortnight began at White Hart Lane in the Premiership, where at half-time his Manchester United team found themselves uncharacteristically trailing by three goals to nil against a lively and inventive Tottenham Hotspur.

Motivated by some well-chosen words from manager Sir Alex Ferguson, Beckham played a significant part in an amazing second-half which saw United claw back the three goal deficit and then add two more for good measure to break Spurs' hearts and astound the rest of the Premiership.

Their 5-3 win was a masterpiece of power, purpose and collective will. Ferguson had reminded United that they were the best team in Britain and urged them to go out and prove it.

No-one responded more eagerly or effectively than David Beckham. He was instrumental in carving open the Tottenham defence for his grateful teammates, then provided the icing on the cake by scoring the fifth goal himself.

It was the perfect launch-pad for crucial World Cup action as Greece visited Old Trafford, with England needing only to match or better Germany's result against Finland to ensure automatic qualification for Japan and Korea next May.

Whether through over-confidence or nerves or both, England produced a disjointed, disappointing performance against a good Greek side who deservedly took the lead. With several key personnel missing (Seaman, Campbell, Owen), and others playing well below their best (Gerrard, Scholes, Barmby), it was left to Beckham to point the way. Tirelessly chasing lost causes, closing down opponents, winning the ball and

instigating attacks from all corners of the pitch, the captain provided the inspiration for his ragged troops.

Yet all Beckham's prompting and probing could not break the Greek resistance until the award of another free-kick to England allowed Sven Goran Eriksson to bring Teddy Sheringham off the bench. Sheringham's understanding with his ex-United colleague was immediately exploited as Beckham planted his kick precisely where Sheringham could back-head it at pace into the Greek net. It was the fastest ever goal by an England substitute. One-all, and England were back in it.

Yet defensive hesitancy immediately handed the advantage back to Greece, who stunned Old Trafford by taking the lead for a second time. Fortunately, Beckham refused to be down-hearted or give up. Some inner belief and spirit, an indomitable certainty that perseverance would bring its own reward, drove Beckham onwards.

It seemed as though England's number seven, with the shaved head, the distinctive white boots and the skipper's armband, was playing Greece on his own. He was everywhere.

The clock was against him, however, as the game moved into time added on for stoppages. Even that was almost exhausted when Sheringham won another free-kick and Beckham, never one to shirk his responsibilities, stepped up to take it from 25 yards with mere seconds remaining. He'd been searching for the perfect range, speed and direction with seven earlier free-kicks at goal. This, he knew, was the last chance.

In a heart-stopping moment, it all came gloriously together, the ball swerving unstoppably into the net before the Greek goalkeeper could move. Two-two, and almost immediately the final whistle sounded. With the Germans having been held to a goalless draw, England were in the World Cup – and Beckham was in football heaven.

The man reviled and abused by many after being sent off for a flash of petulance against Argentina during France '98 had not only been thoroughly rehabilitated; he had become his nation's undisputed hero. His grateful countrymen, led by an ecstatic media, were eager to worship at Beckham's white-shod feet.

Experienced observers such as ex-England boss Bobby Robson, now manager of Newcastle United, described Beckham's performance against Greece as the best he'd seen by any player, anywhere, at any time. Others were equally effusive in their praise.

It was all a bit too much for Ferguson, whose task was to get Beckham's head back out of the clouds as Manchester United prepared to take on Olympiakos in the Champions League. Ferguson toyed seriously with the idea of omitting Beckham from the starting line-up, in case the effort and adulation of the past few days had taken too much out of him.

But at the last moment he named him in the team, and was rewarded with yet another tireless performance. This time Beckham broke the deadlock by putting United ahead with an opportunistic goal, paving the way for Andy Cole to wrap up what in the end was a comfortable victory against opponents who had never previously lost at home in the Champions League.

Once more David Beckham, world superstar, had proved that he has that elusive, golden touch of the natural born winner.

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