



From PAUL SMITH

DAVID BECKHAM has admitted he almost stopped breathing through fear before stepping up to take the biggest penalty kick of his life.

And he also revealed he was forced to endure 'dirty tricks' from the Argentine players, particularly Diego Simeone, who went over to shake his hand before the spot-kick.

Not only was it the ultimate test of Beckham's bottle but sagging doubts about his fitness had fans fearing the worst.

Could Goldenballs deliver and take England into dreamland — or was it going to be another World Cup penalty nightmare?

TV close-ups showed the England captain swallowing hard as the moment of truth approached but, as usual, he delivered and the rest is history.

"I had to take a deep breath as I walked towards the spot. Some very deep breaths. At one point I nearly stopped breathing."

Yesterday Beckham went into detail about the match and that penalty kick — which he describes as the sweetest moment of his career.

He said: "This game meant so much to me, my family and to the whole nation."

"As a football country this moment was made for us all. We've been waiting for this for a long time — it's nice it's finally come."

"It's definitely beats the 5-1 victory over Germany during the World Cup qualifiers. No doubt about it. It's better than that one."

"There was a great deal of history between us and Germany but then there was even more history with Argentina."

"It's nice to be able to walk away from it all now and put the whole episode to rest. We knew it would be a tough game."

"We warned each other before the match that things would go on and we certainly had to keep our heads above us."

"There were all sorts of things going on and off the pitch and there were a few little tricks being played just before the penalty," he said.

"I really don't know what was going through my mind when we got that penalty."

"As soon as Michael Owen went over in the area he got up and came over to me and said, 'Do you want it or shall I?'"

"I said I wanted it. The reasons were obvious. You can see why. Whatever anyone said Argentina are a world class side with world-class players and that's a fact."

"There were certain flashbacks from

# BECKS: I WAS SO SCARED I COULD HARDLY BREATHE



into the net. It was an emotional one for me really. Couldn't you tell? Then the ball went in I felt the ten of it all lined and in seconds it drained away. I know the moment was special for fans as well. The place was packed with England supporters and I think the whole team scored that penalty with me. They were willing the ball into me and were magnificent all evening. It gave us a chance against Argentina. It wasn't as important as it seems. It was important enough, so to score is unbelievable. We knew they were going

to create chances against us but even when they threw everything at us they couldn't break us down. Our defence was magnificent. "But we are not through yet and we can't become complacent because we've beaten Argentina. "We can't afford to sit back against Nigeria on Wednesday like we did against Sweden in the second half or we will be in real trouble. "We let it slip against the Swedes. We have to make sure that we keep our concentration. There is far too much to lose.

"Nicky Butt was exceptional. He didn't put in a foot wrong all night. He made all the right moves, made telling tackles and didn't put one pass astray. "But the whole team was exceptional. We performed from the back right up to the front two. The lads were incredible. "We desperately wanted this result. I'm extremely fired but the result got me through it all."

SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS: No prizes for guessing what might be going through Beckham's mind on the morning after the glorious night before

MARVEL: Beckham posed as the ball on the pitch