

Rooney joining soon

INTERNET, London

Everton striker Wayne Rooney will join up with the England squad before they fly out to La Manga on Friday night.

Everton boss David Moyes held a briefing on Friday in which he revealed that Rooney will meet up with his England team-mates at Heathrow.

Moyes said that 17-year-old Rooney, who controversially missed England's friendly against South Africa in Durban because of a medial knee ligament injury, was 50-50 for the friendly against Serbia and Montenegro on 3 June at The Walkers Stadium.

But Moyes felt Rooney had a better chance of being fit for the Euro 2004 qualifier against Slovakia on 11 June at The Riverside Stadium.

Moyes said: "Wayne travels to La Manga and joins up with the rest of the squad - but he will be at best 50-50 to be involved in the Serbia game, and then people will maybe realise that he has had an injury. He has a better chance of playing against Slovakia."

He added: "We were not trying to kid anybody on, which I would never do."

Rooney has spent the week training under the control of Everton physio Mick Rathbone at the club's Bellefield training ground.

Bundesliga preview 'Neverkusen' again?

AFP, Berlin

Last year's Champions League finalists Bayer Leverkusen face a make-a-break visit to Nuremberg Saturday as the curtains come down on this season's Bundesliga amid accusations of wheeling and dealing.

Leverkusen are fourth from the bottom, one point ahead of fellow relegation battlers Arminia Bielefeld, and are heading for the drop unless they win at Nuremberg, who are already condemned to Division Two next season.

Accusations of deal-making are rife with Bielefeld goalkeeper Matthias Hain accusing Leverkusen bosses and second-from-bottom Nuremberg of striking a deal when Thomas Horster was replaced for the final two games of the season by Nuremberg coach Klaus Augenthaler.

"I think that the match result has been discussed," Hain told the sports magazine Kicker.

"I've confidence in the players but not in the officials who manoeuvred the transfer of Augenthaler," said Hain.

"No one can tell me that bosses of Nuremberg and Leverkusen didn't discuss the match. I'm 100 percent convinced of it. But I'm not including the players or coaches.

"I presume that the players are professionals who won't let themselves be influenced by the thoughts of the president who needs money," he added.

A win by Leverkusen will condemn Bielefeld to Division Two, whatever the result against visiting Hanover, who are assured of their Bundesliga status next season.

Nuremberg president Michael Roth admitted early in the week that he would prefer that Leverkusen stay up - "then we'd have one rival fewer in the Second Division".

And rumours of a done deal were fueled further when Nuremberg's Czech midfielder David Jarolim announced that he is in talks with Leverkusen for next season.

In other Bundesliga action champions Bayern Munich have nothing to play for but pride when they visit Schalke 04.

The runners-up spot, however, is still open with Borussia Dortmund who host Energie Cottbus one point ahead of third placed VfB Stuttgart, who want to assure their Champions League place when they host VfL Wolfsburg.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Borussia Dortmund v Energie Cottbus, VfB Stuttgart v VfL Wolfsburg, Schalke 04 v Bayern Munich, Borussia Monchengladbach v Werder Bremen, Arminia Bielefeld v Hanover 96, Hamburg v Hansa Rostock, 1860 Munich v VfL Bochum, Nuremberg v Bayer Leverkusen, Hertha Hertha v Kaiserslautern

Becks breaks thumb

Squeaky England win

Football

AFP, Durban

England midfielder David Beckham broke a bone at the bottom of his thumb as his team beat South Africa 2-1 in a friendly here on Thursday.

He was upended in a tackle by Thabang Molefe during the first half and fell heavily on to his right arm.

After being replaced six minutes into the second half by Jermaine Jenas, his hand was strapped and he was taken to hospital.

Beckham was heading back to England Friday for more tests on the hand injury.

The injury is not an immediate worry for England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, however, as Beckham was already ruled out of the Euro qualifier with Slovakia on June 11 through suspension.

But any injury to the Manchester United star is big news and he will now return to his club for treatment and to find out the full damage.

"David has suffered a fractured scaphoid which is a bone at the bottom of the thumb leading into the wrist bone," FA spokesman Adrian Bevington said.

"He went to hospital after suffering the injury, had an x-ray and it has been confirmed that there is a break.

"With regards to the extent of the injury in terms of how long David will need treatment, we are not sure at this stage.

"But David flew back to England from South Africa early this morning and he will return to Manchester United for treatment. Hopefully it can settle down quickly and he can have a good summer.

Goals from Gareth Southgate - after just 36 seconds - and Emile Heskey ensured victory for England in front of a passionate crowd at what was being seen as the start of South Africa's bid for the 2010 World Cup finals.

Gareth Southgate put the visitors ahead after just 36 seconds, Benni McCarthy levelled from a penalty and Emile Heskey struck the second half winner.

The match marked the international launch of the South African bid to host World Cup 2010 with Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia their rivals in a contest reserved for African nations.

England lacked injured Everton 'wonderboy' Wayne Rooney while club commitments around Europe deprived South Africa of half their



Gareth Southgate (L) of England heads his team in front against South Africa at Durban on May 22.

PHOTO: INTERNET

first-choice team.

South Africa were caught napping from the kickoff as England broke down the right and captain Lucas Radebe, making his final international appearance after 70 caps spanning 12 years, fouled Michael Owen.

Beckham flighted the free kick into the penalty area and defender Southgate rose unchallenged at the near post to head the ball powerfully past Brian Baloyi. England came close to increasing their lead with seven minutes gone as Baloyi spilled a Beckham free kick only for Owen to blaze over.

After struggling during a frenetic opening period, South Africa gradually gained their composure and levelled with 18 minutes gone in perfect playing conditions.

A Delron Buckley cross was handled by Danny Mills and McCarthy converted the penalty kick, driving the ball wide of David James into the corner of the net.

Mills was booked by Mauritian referee Lim Kee Chong for the offence and South African defender Mbulelo Mabizela received a caution soon after for a wild tackle.

The free kick presented Beckham with another chance to demonstrate his legendary free kick-taking skills, but his timid attempt was comfortably held by Baloyi.

A third yellow card was flashed midway through the first half with

Thabang Molefe punished for a reckless tackle that sent Beckham crashing into the lush Absa Stadium turf.

Mills nearly atoned for his blunder nine minutes before half-time, ghosting into the penalty area and winning possession only to fire over with just Baloyi to beat.

As half-time approached in the balmy Indian Ocean city, South Africa had shed their inferiority complex and were winning more possession than their much vaunted opponents.

McCarthy could have snatched the lead for Bafana Bafana (The Boys) in first-half stoppage time after a Buckley through ball set him free inside the penalty area, but his shot was embarrassingly off target.

England made two changes during the interval, introducing goalkeeper Paul Robinson and defender Matthew Upson, and Beckham departed the stage six minutes into the second half showing no obvious sign of discomfort.

Idolised by thousands of South Africans who had vainly tried to catch a glimpse of their hero since his arrival Tuesday, Beckham had been a largely peripheral figure until his departure.

Another Manchester United midfielder, Paul Scholes squandered a half chance with a 'fresh air' effort from close range before England regained the lead against the run of play in the 64th minute

after another Baloyi blunder.

He failed to grasp a medium range shot from substitute Frank Lampard and previously anonymous Emile Heskey was in like a flash to prod the rebound over the line.

South Africa continued to hold their own despite losing limping McCarthy, but were desperately short of imagination in attack with recalled Shaun Bartlett making no impression.

TEAMS

South Africa: Brian Baloyi, Mbulelo Mabizela, Thabang Molefe, Aaron Mokoena, Lucas Radebe (capt), MacBeth Sibaya, Tebeho Mokoena (Jabulani Mendo 69), Stanton Fredericks (Clement Mazibuko 77), Delron Buckley, Shaun Bartlett, Benni McCarthy (Lesley Manyathela 68)

England: David James (Paul Robinson 46), Danny Mills, Phillip Neville, Steven Gerrard (Gareth Barry 82), Rio Ferdinand (Matthew Upson 46), Gareth Southgate, David Beckham (capt, Jermaine Jenas 51), Paul Scholes (Joe Cole 75), Emile Heskey (Darius Vassell 65), Michael Owen, Trevor Sinclair (Frank Lampard 59)

Referee: Lim Kee Chong (MRI)

Yellow cards: Mills 17 (England), Mabizela 19 (South Africa), Molefe 27 (South Africa)



SORRY IT HAD TO END THIS WAY! England captain David Beckham salutes the crowd after being substituted during their international friendly against South Africa at the ABSA stadium in Durban on May 22.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Primera Liga preview

Time to bury the myth

Football

AFP, Madrid

It is 13 seasons since Real Sociedad last won in Malaga but the league leaders are hoping that it will be their lucky number on Sunday.

The Basques have 69 points from 34 games, with four games still to go, and a one-point advantage at the top of the Spanish First Division over Real Madrid.

"The championship is in our own hands. All we have to do is keep winning," said Real Sociedad coach Raynald Denoueix this week.

Malaga have not always been generous hosts and the Costa Del Sol club have the best home record this season of any team in the lower half of the table, having only lost three times.

However, regardless of the result, Valery Karpin said on Thursday that he will be smiling at the end of the season.

"The worst we are going to finish is third, and that's not a disaster. Next season we are going to be in the Champions League, Europe's top club competition for the first time in more than 20 years," said the Russian midfielder.

Karpin, signed last summer from Celta Vigo, has been one of the main reasons why Sociedad have been transformed into championship contenders.

"If people are disappointed with third, then they will have forgotten what had been happening here over the last three seasons when it was a continual fight against relegation," he added.

Denoueix is expected to name virtually the same side that beat Recreativo Huelva 1-0 last Sunday, although Darko Kovacevic, the scorer of 18 goals this season, was laid up for several days this week with a stomach upset.

The French coach is also known to be considering swapping Igor Gabilondo for Boris Gonzalez at left back.

Gabilondo, normally a midfielder, filled the role on an emergency basis against Recreativo in the absence of the injured Spanish international Agustin Aranzabal but didn't inspire much confidence he was up to the task.

Real Madrid have a difficult away trip to Valencia on Saturday, with the reigning Spanish championship still buoyant after their impressive 2-1 win at Deportivo La Coruna last weekend.

"When we are on form, we can beat anyone in the world, including Real Madrid," commented Valencia defender Mauricio Pellegrino, tacitly acknowledging that they have relinquished their title due to players often taking matches for

Recreativo are in penultimate position with 34 points - the same number of points as fellow strugglers Alaves but an inferior head-to-head record - but they have often proven to be tenacious opponents on their less-than-perfect pitch.

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Valencia will be without their suspended Spanish international midfielder David Albelda but have an adequate replacement in fellow international Ruben Baraja.

Deportivo are also still in the hunt, lying third with 66 points, but must go to fifth-placed Celta for a tense Galician derby on Saturday.

"This derby is unlike any that have gone before because both teams are playing for such high stakes," acknowledged Deportivo captain Fran Gonzalez on Thursday.

Deportivo must get at least a point if they are to retain a realistic interest in the title, while a win is vital for Vigo if they are to finish fourth and get into Champions League for the first time.

Celta will have to cope without the banned Mido and Peter Luccin, who were both sent off in the 5-0 loss at Villarreal last Sunday.

The battle at the bottom of the table is also reaching a climax.

Rayo Vallecano are last and five points adrift with 29 points, but could improve their slim chances of avoiding the drop by beating Osasuna, who hover only one place above the relegation zone.

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18-team Ligue 1 next season

AFP, Paris

The 20-club French First Division will downsize to 18 clubs as of the 2004/2005 season after it was deemed that 38 matches a season was just too much for the elite of French football.

The French top flight had been operating with 18 clubs since the 1997-98 season but an increase to 20 for this current season, and for next season (2003-2004), was decided to gauge potential.

However Frederic Thiriez, the president of the French Professional League's committee, said it was evident the experiment had not worked.

"It is a courageous decision," he said referring to positive vote for the proposal by a majority of the league's clubs.

Out of 16 votes, 12 voted for a return to 18 clubs with four against.

He added: "The decision to increase to 20 clubs was made before I took this post. But the outcome hasn't been positive. Thirty-eight match days is just too much.

However, despite the agreement in principle, the league's top brass have not yet decided on the modalities of relegation and promotion issues.

The French Second Division meanwhile is set to increase from 20 to 22 clubs - a proposal that is apparently causing more anxiety than the decision concerning the top flight.

"Against Como we were far too

Serie A preview

Drama at the bottom

Football

AFP, Rome

The final round of matches in the Italian football season take place on Saturday with strugglers Atalanta and Reggina fighting for their Serie A lives.

Tied on 35 points, the two relegation-threatened teams will battle to avoid the drop along with Como, Torino and Piacenza, who have already been consigned to the Second Division.

Atalanta face a resurgent AS Roma in the capital, while southern Reggina visit Bologna.

Should they both end the campaign level on points, a two-legged play-off will decide who goes down as goal difference does not come into play when deciding relegation.

Atalanta captain Cristiano Doni, scorer of both his side's goals in their scrappy 2-1 win at home to Como last weekend, is confident of winning at the Olympic stadium.

"We have to believe we can go to Rome and get three points. If we go there with the wrong attitude, we'll go down," said the Italy international.

"Against Como we were far too

nervous and if we play with the same fear against Roma we'll get buried.

"But I believe if we remain focused we can win. Then we will look for Reggina's result.

"I think we will stay up without having to face a play-off."

Atalanta will be without Daniele Berretta, Ousmane Dabo and Cesare Natali, who are all suspended.

FIXTURES

Saturday (all kick-offs 1300 GMT): Bologna v Reggina, Brescia v Modena, Como v Torino, Empoli v Parma, Inter Milan v Perugia, Juventus v Chievo, Piacenza v AC Milan, AS Roma v Atalanta, Udinese v Lazio

Reggina striker Emiliano Bonazzoli is similarly upbeat about his team's own chances of surviving the drop, despite the Calabrian club's disastrous away record that has seen them win just once away from their Granillo stadium.

"I think we have every chance of winning at Bologna and I don't feel Atalanta have what it takes to beat Roma," said the former Verona striker.

Ligue 1 preview

Last day formalities?

Football

AFP, Paris

As the former France skipper who led his country to victories in the World Cup and European championships Didier Deschamps has enjoyed success and popularity.

But life as the coach of Monaco only days before the French league season draws to a close on Saturday - with Lyon already assured of their second straight championship title - is proving a little more testing.

Deschamps' Monaco side lost all chance of clinching the title Tuesday when they crashed 3-1

away to Guingamp and Lyon drew 1-1 with Montpellier.

To add spice to the end of the season Deschamps has been slammed by Argentina midfielder Marcelo Gallardo, who despite having a fresh contract is now surely on his way out of the club - but is not staying quiet.

Gallardo is the second big name player, following a well-publicised spat involving Italian marksman Marco Simone, to clash with the diminutive coach whose man management skills are being put under the spotlight.

"My decision is made," Gallardo told AFP. "If Deschamps is still here at the end of the season I'm leaving. I don't want anything more to do with him.

"He's got qualities and he cer-

tainly knows football, but on a human level he's got a lot to learn.

"Since January I've kept my mouth shut," added Gallardo, who Deschamps has sat on the substitute's bench since it was announced the Argentine had signed a new contract to run till 2007.

"I've acted like a professional. But now that the season is over, I can see things more clearly and, since I'm not playing, it doesn't look too good.

Only a fly on the wall of the Monaco dressing room could tell the whole story of Deschamps' relations with his players.

Last week he led Monaco to a 4-1 drubbing of Sochaux in the French League Cup final to become the youngest coach to win the trophy.

Up until Tuesday's night of action, Monaco had also been in contention for the league title until their surprise defeat in Brittany ended all hope they had of catching the reigning champions.

More importantly, Monaco slipped from second to third in the league, meaning the sparkling lure of the Champions League has now dulled because they will have to contest the preliminary first round.

Marseille, sitting in second, have had a magnificent season after seemingly endless seasons of crisis and are keen to hang on to second spot.

At the other end of the table the relegation fight, after which three teams will go down, is still very much alive.

Except Troyes, who are already relegated, second-from bottom Le Havre (35), Sedan (36) and fourth-from-bottom Rennes (37) will all be going out with only victory in mind.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Lens v Bastia, Ajaccio v Strasbourg, Monaco v Troyes, Sochaux v Sedan, Lyon v Guingamp, Le Havre v Nice, Rennes v Montpellier, Auxerre v Paris St Germain, Bordeaux v Lille, Nantes v Marseille