

Injury-line gets longer



REUTERS, London

Some of European football's best players will all miss playing in Saturday's important European Championship qualifiers either through injury or suspension.

While David Beckham, arguably the biggest star on the European stage, said on Friday he expects to play for England against Macedonia in their Group Seven match after shaking off a groin strain, others were not so lucky.

Beckham's Real Madrid teammate, France playmaker Zinedine Zidane, has a thigh strain and misses the Group One match against Cyprus in Paris which could see France clinch the first qualifying place in next year's finals in Portugal.

Ruud Van Nistelrooy of the Netherlands, a former teammate of Beckham at Manchester United, will also be sidelined through suspension for the home match against Austria.

The good news for Dutch coach Dick Advocaat is that he will be eligible for what is likely to be the Group Three decider against the Czech Republic in Prague next Wednesday.

The Dutch also have a doubt about Roy Makaay, who is something of a lucky omen for the national team as he has never been on the losing side in 24 appearances for the Netherlands.

If he shakes off a knee injury he should replace Van Nistelrooy, otherwise Patrick Kluivert will lead the attack against the Austrians in Rotterdam.

Italy, meanwhile are fretting over the fitness of striker Christian Vieri

for their top-of-the-table Group Nine match against Wales in Milan. Coach Giovanni Trapattoni, already without the injured Francesco Totti, looked nervous as Vieri limped off during training on Thursday after aggravating a knee injury.

England are without Rio Ferdinand, Paul Scholes, Steven Gerrard and Trevor Sinclair for the trip to Macedonia, while Wales have their own problems, most of which

scored both goals. Ukraine coach Leonid Buryak said he will make a decision whether to play Shevchenko on Friday without specifying the type of injury to the striker.

For their part Northern Ireland will be trying to avoid a share in an unwelcome record.

They have failed to score in 10 matches since March 2002 and if they fail again on Saturday they will

their remaining games. Norway also have two games left, against Bosnia and Luxembourg, and have 11 points to Denmark's 13.

Norwegian coach Nils Johan Semb, who plans to quit early if Norway fail to qualify for Euro 2004, has no major injury worries. He said that Norway had one of the best away records in Europe despite a 1-0 defeat to Denmark in June.

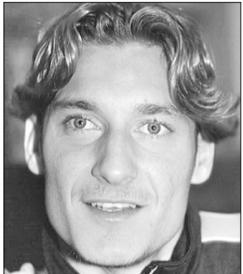
"Statistics and history show that



ZINEDINE ZIDANE



RUUD VAN NISTELROOY



FRANCESCO TOTTI

have revolved around the right knee of pacy striker Craig Bellamy.

Bellamy, who poses a considerable striking threat, has missed Newcastle United's most recent matches but after days of uncertainty has declared himself fit to play against the Italians.

Ukraine, facing a tough, but not impossible task of qualifying for their first finals ahead of Greece or Spain, are also likely to be without their top striker, Andriy Shevchenko.

Shevchenko is doubtful for Saturday's Group Six match in Donetsk against the goal-shy Northern Ireland side after injuring his leg in AC Milan's 2-0 win over Ancona on Monday where he

equal the worst ever run by a European nation set by Liechtenstein between September 2000 and March 2002.

Oddly, Northern Ireland's goalless streak started the day Liechtenstein's ended.

One man definitely back from injury is Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, who has recovered from a knee injury that kept him out of Manchester United's league match at Southampton last week. He should be fit to face Bosnia and says Norway can overtake Denmark to win Group Two.

"I think we will win the group with two victories," he said, predicting that Denmark would fail to win both

we're a hard nut to crack when we play abroad," he told Norway's NTB news agency.

Among those looking forward to playing at the weekend are Tugay Kerimoglu of Turkey who will win his 88th cap against Liechtenstein on Saturday and equal Bulent Korkmaz, if Bulent should miss the game.

A number of countries will complete their qualifying programmes in the next few days, but only reigning champions France can actually qualify for the finals on Saturday if they beat Cyprus and Slovenia fail to beat Israel.

Oliver urges Germans to be 'killers'

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany captain Oliver Kahn said on Friday his team needed to develop a "killer mentality" to end the team's long run of largely mediocre results and cannot afford anything less than a victory against Iceland on Saturday.

Kahn told reporters ahead of Germany's Euro 2004 qualifier in Iceland the team needed to win on Saturday to move closer to clinching a spot in the finals in Portugal next year.

"We need to show a killer mentality and strike coldly," Kahn said. "We have to avoid a situation where we have to win the home match against Iceland in October to qualify. We want to make sure we wrap up the qualification in the next two matches."

Germany, who play Scotland in Dortmund on Wednesday, are second in Group Five with 11 points from five matches with Iceland the surprise leaders on 12 from six. Scotland are third with eight points from five.

"In the past we've often been under pressure, but always come through in the key moment," Kahn said. "Germany teams need pressure and we aren't any good for friendlies."

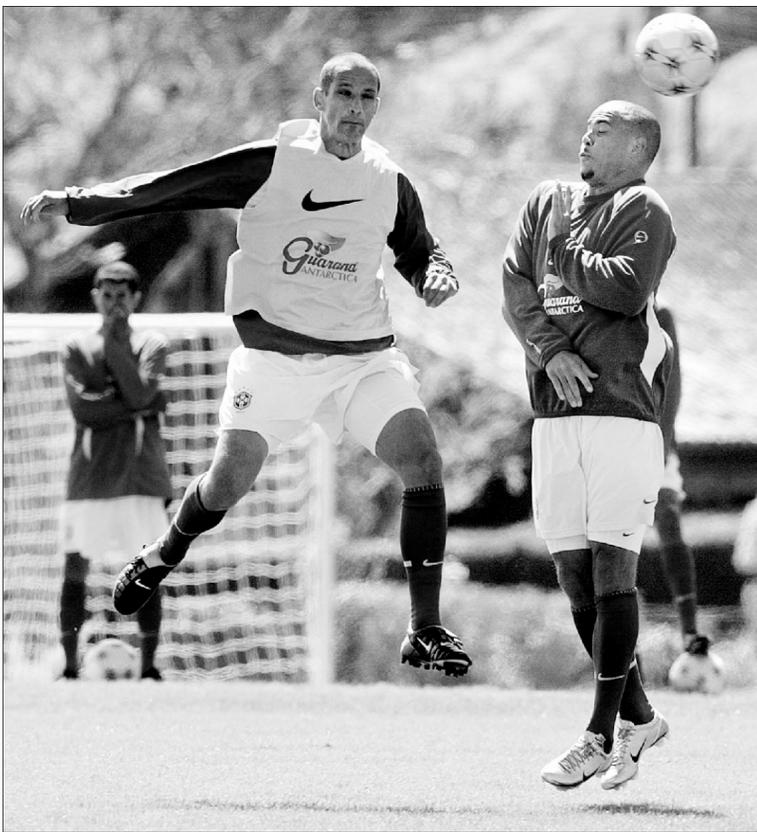


PHOTO: AFP
Brazil superstar Ronaldo (R) and teammate Juliano Belletti go through a practice session at Granja Comary, 120 kilometres from Rio de Janeiro on September 5. Brazil face Colombia today in Barranquilla in a World Cup 2006 qualifier.

Foe memorial game in Lyon

AFP, Paris

The memorial match for Cameroonian footballer Marc-Vivien Foe who died during the Confederations Cup tournament in June will take place in Lyon on November 11, the president of the French league Frederic Thiriez announced on Friday.

Cameroon will face a team drawn from Foe's clubs, including Lyon and Lens of France and English Premiership side Manchester City, and French internationals Thierry Henry, Robert Pires and Steve Marlet may also take part.

The team will be jointly coached by France's national coach Jacques Santini and Manchester City boss Kevin Keegan, who was in charge of Foe last season.

Gate receipts and sponsorship from the match will go to Foe's wife and three children and will also finance the creation of a foundation bearing the player's name.

Foe collapsed and died on the pitch in Lyon during Cameroon's 1-0 win over Colombia in the semi-final of the Confederations Cup.

The 28-year-old's death was attributed to a rare heart problem.

Notts County Countdown

AFP, London

The countdown is on to save Notts County, the world's oldest football league club, who face expulsion from Division Two Monday if the Football League's board of directors are unconvinced by plans for a takeover.

The Meadow Lane outfit have spent 15 months in administration with the latest takeover proposal being dependent on Notts County Supporters' Trust raising 250,000 pounds (396,000 dollars) to help bankroll the rescue package.

Administrator Paul Finnity said Saturday that he was cautiously confident that fan power would rescue the 141-year-old club.

"Whilst we have one or two things still to finalise before the meeting of the board of the Football League on Monday, we're cautiously confident there won't be any last minute hitches and a deal acceptable to all parties will be agreed," said Finnity.

"However, to finalise the deal the Notts County Supporters' Trust need to raise 250,000 pounds, which they are hopeful of securing following declarations of financial support from fans of other football clubs."

The Second Division side went into administration in June 2002 after accruing mounting debts in the wake of the ITV Digital collapse.

Portugal Spain coach's team

AFP, Lisbon

Spain coach Inaki Saez on Friday backed hosts Portugal as the favourites to win the Euro 2004 tournament next summer.

"Portugal have players of great individual quality, a World Cup winning coach with lots of experience and they will be playing at home, which gives inspiration to matches," he said.

"They have everything in their favour." Spain play Portugal in a friendly here on Saturday.

As hosts, the Portuguese automatically qualify for Euro 2004 but coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, who guided Brazil to their fifth World Cup title in 2002, has lined up a series of competitive exhibition matches to prepare for the tournament.

PHOTO: AFP
Brazil superstar Ronaldo (R) and teammate Juliano Belletti go through a practice session at Granja Comary, 120 kilometres from Rio de Janeiro on September 5. Brazil face Colombia today in Barranquilla in a World Cup 2006 qualifier.

Scots' chance at hand



REUTERS, Glasgow

Scotland have the chance to gain a measure of revenge for one of the most humiliating results in their history when they take on the Faroe Islands in Saturday's Group Five Euro 2004 qualifier.

Ten minutes into their first qualifying match last September Scotland found themselves trailing 2-0 the 123rd-ranked Faroeese and only goals from Paul Lambert and, in the 84th minute, Barry Ferguson, scrambled a 2-2 draw.

"We've changed a lot of players from last year's match and the system," said manager Bert Vogts on Friday. "I think now we are playing with more passion and we are ready to win this game."

Indeed the Scots, now third on eight points from five games, still have a strong chance of a top-two finish.

Germany, who they play in Dortmund on Wednesday, are second on 11 from five with Iceland

the surprise leaders on 12 from six. Vogts is well aware that Wednesday's game will probably make or break Scotland's chances but is trying to concentrate his efforts on Saturday's game.

"We must focus only on this match and forget about Germany," said the man who led his homeland to the Euro 96 title.

The draw with Scotland remains the only point the Faroes have picked up in the group but they were desperately close to also drawing with Germany and Iceland.

Faroes manager Henrik Larsen says his side have the ability upset the Scots again.

"I'm hoping we can get a good result against Scotland because our boys deserve it and I think we can," he said.

Vogts' side have managed back-to-back draws with Germany in June's qualifier and a 0-0 away friendly in Norway last month, but he will have to change his side for this match.

Defenders Christian Dailly of West Ham United and Steven Pressley of Hearts are suspended with Dundee defender Lee Wilkie

certain to be recalled to the starting line-up.

Southampton winger Neil McCann could also feature from the start.

Captain Paul Lambert is nursing an ankle injury and will decide on Saturday morning if he is fit for the Hampden Park game.

West Ham United forward Don Hutchison has joined Lambert as a concern with a muscle injury sustained in training on Thursday and will have a fitness test on Saturday.

TEAMS
SCOTLAND: Robert Douglas; Maurice Ross, Lee Wilkie, Andy Webster, Gary Naysmith; Paul Lambert, Barry Ferguson, Colin Cameron, Neil McCann; Steve Crawford, Don Hutchison.
FAROE ISLANDS: Jakup Mikkelsen; Oli Johannesen, Hans Frodi Hansen, Pol Thorsteinsson, Jon Roi Jacobsen; Rogvi Jacobsen, Frodi Benjaminsen, Julian Johnsson, Jakup a Borg; John Petersen, Andrew av Flotum.

UEFA praises Portuguese 'miracle'

AFP, Lisbon

European football's governing body UEFA praised Portugal on Friday for the "miracle" of having successfully prepared ten stadia for the Euro 2004 football finals in little more than three years.

"It is a miracle what is currently happening in Portugal with respect to the construction of the ten stadia," said the head of UEFA's stadium committee, Ernie Walker, at the end of a four-day inspection of the venues for next year's European championships.

"I never imagined it would be possible to have all the stadiums ready and functioning in time for the Euro 2004," he added.

Portugal, one of Europe's poorest nations, is spending some 800 million euros (870 million dollars) to build seven new stadiums and renovate three others for the tournament, the biggest international sports event ever held in Portugal.

Under UEFA rules, the basic structure of the venues must be ready by the end of September.

During earlier visits, Walker had expressed concern over the delays in the building work of some stadiums and warned Portugal risked losing the right to hold the championship if the venues were not ready on time.

Builders temporarily stopped work on stadiums in Lisbon and in second city Oporto last year because of a row between city officials and sports clubs over public financing for the venues.

Up to three million people are expected to visit Portugal because of the championships, the largest sporting event after the Olympics and the World Cup, which will take place from June 12 to July 4.

Vieri fit

REUTERS, Appiano Gentile

Christian Vieri has been passed fit to spearhead Italy's attack in their Euro 2004 qualifier against Wales on Saturday after recovering from a knee injury.

The Italians were in danger of losing the burly striker when he pulled up sharply during training on Thursday but he showed no discomfort during a final training session on Friday.

The Inter Milan player started with some gentle limbering up before joining in a practice match with the rest of the squad.

His speedy recovery is a big boost for Italy who must win at the San Siro to leapfrog Wales to the top of Group Nine.

"This has been a rough week," said national coach Giovanni Trapattoni. "We've had to hang on for a while for one or two players. Tomorrow we'll make a couple of final checks."

Italy's biggest doubt now surrounds Juventus midfielder Alessio Tacchinardi, who is suffering from a muscle strain.

If he fails to make it, his place will be taken by AC Milan's Gennaro Gattuso or Chievo's Simone Perrotta who has recovered from a hamstring injury.

ITALY

Gianluigi Buffon; Christian Panucci, Alessandro Nesta, Fabio Cannavaro, Gianluca Zambrotta; Mauro Camoranesi, Alessio Tacchinardi, Cristiano Zanetti; Alessandro Del Piero; Filippo Inzaghi, Christian Vieri.

No Brit lout in Skopje



REUTERS, Skopje

No known hooligans have entered Macedonia for England's Euro 2004 qualifier and no incidents have been reported involving English fans, British police said on Saturday.

David Swift, head of the British police delegation, was cautiously optimistic about the behaviour of England supporters before Saturday's Group Seven game in Skopje.

England's Football Association (FA) had urged fans not to travel to the game, fearing a rerun of crowd trouble in April's 2-0 home win over Turkey that could lead to the team being excluded from next year's championship in Portugal.

UEFA, European football's governing body, had warned that any repeat could lead to England being thrown out. They were second in the group behind Turkey before Saturday's matches but with a game

in hand. Their final match on October 11 is in Turkey.

Swift told a news conference that, as of late Friday, some 300 British passport holders had entered Macedonia, with a further 200 expected on Saturday.

To date, none of the 1,700 troublemakers issued with banning orders, which prevent them from leaving Britain, had been identified at Macedonian border checks.

In addition to those subject to a banning order, Swift said: "None of the individuals who we would normally associate with organising or being significant participants in any form of disorder or trouble have been identified either."

Glad that only 500 England fans were expected at the game, having bought tickets on the black market, Swift said: "That represents a considerable success."

"It does show that the advice of the FA and the British government has been substantially heeded."

"I can't recall there ever being an England game in a foreign country, regardless of how far away it was,

with less individuals present from England."

The FA has not taken their ticket allocation for England fans, setting them aside instead for Macedonian youngsters, in the hope of avoiding crowd problems.

Local authorities have not planned any segregation of fans within the Skopje stadium and all supporters will be searched on their way into the ground, Swift said.

"Macedonian police have some 1,500 officers available to deploy. Their strategy is based on tolerance, understanding and communication, but a preparedness to act if necessary," he said.

British officers have been working alongside Macedonian police at the borders with Bulgaria and Greece, and within Skopje itself.

The FA has also turned down their ticket allocation for England's final qualifier on October in Turkey. Swift made a plea to fans who have made it to Skopje not to contemplate heading for Istanbul.

Fenerbahce freed



AFP, Ankara

Turkish football authorities have lifted a one-match stadium closure order imposed on first-division Fenerbahce for crowd violence at a

game last month, the Anatolia news agency said Friday.

Twelve people, including a child, were injured at the August 15 game at Trabzonspor's home stadium, in the Black Sea city of Trabzon, when Fenerbahce fans were angered by the referee's decision and fighting broke out between rival supporters at half-time.

It was the first match to be played at the stadium after Trabzonspor removed fences separating spectators from the pitch. Fenerbahce won the game 1-0.

In late August, the Turkish Football Federation imposed a one-match stadium closure and a fine of one billion Turkish liras (about 720 dollars) against Fenerbahce, a sanction which the Istanbul club appealed.

At a meeting late Thursday, the arbitration board ruled in favour of Fenerbahce's appeal and unanimously voted to lift the closure, the board's president Turker Asalan told Anatolia.

The fine however was increased from one billion to 2.5 billion liras (about 1,800 dollars), he added.

The ruling was welcomed by Fenerbahce. The club said in a statement on Friday the board's decision was "in line with rules".

But Trabzonspor club president Ozkan Sumar resigned Friday in protest.

"With his ruling, the arbitration board has put stadium monsters under its protection," Sumar, quoted by Anatolia, told a news conference.

"This is not about Fenerbahce getting a fine. Trabzonspor has become the guilty party through this decision...All I can do in response is to resign," he said.

The August 15 incident came at a time when the Turkish Football Federation is under pressure to clamp down on football-related violence ahead of the potentially explosive Euro 2004 qualifier on October 11 between Turkey and England at the Fenerbahce stadium in Istanbul.

European football's governing body UEFA has threatened to throw both sides out of European football if there is a repeat of the scenes which followed the England-Turkey game at Sunderland in April.



PHOTO: AFP
Italy striker Christian Vieri (R) comes takes to the field with coach Giovanni Trapattoni to take part in training at Appiano Gentile on September 5.