A soap and a suspense thriller



The point England require against Turkey here on Saturday is no longer just about securing a place in next summer's Euro 2004 finals without having to tiptoe through the minefield of the play-offs.

At the end of a week in which English footballers in general have severely tried the patience of the nation, Sven-Goran Eriksson's squad find themselves needing to make a point, as well as take one

An ill-judged and ultimately futile threat to boycott the match in protest at the exclusion of Rio Ferdinand for missing a drugs test, has ensured the players have been subjected to a barrage of scorn and ridicule, the like of which only David Beckham can claim to have experienced before.

Beckham was eventually forgiven for the moment of petulance that contributed to England's exit from the 1998 World Cup in France.

But he and the rest of the current squad must know that redemption may not be so easily achieved should they wilt in the furnace of Fenerbahce's Sukru Saracoglu stadium on Saturday

Turkey are ranked comfortably above England in FIFA's global rankings and blessed with an outstanding generation of players that carried them to the brink of last summer's World Cup

Even without the distractions of the last few days they would have started, in the eyes of many neutrals, as marginal favourites to beat an England team shorn of both Ferdinand and their most reliable source of goals, Michael Owen.

But that will count for nothing if England lose. Defeat inevitably will be traced straight back to the extraordinary events of a week in which the players spent more time in union meetings than they did on the training field.

That collective bout of petulance was deemed, by some of England's unforgiving football press, to justify branding the players as "traitors."

Worse can only follow if the alleged treachery is compounded by tame surrender on Saturday night.

Eriksson, who is reported to be desperate to devise an exit strategy from the frustrations of his current job, may suddenly discover that his employare no longer so keen to stand between him and Claudio Ranieri's job

The Swede may have angered the FA by refusing to join attempts to corral

the players into line over Ferdinand.

But his ambiguous role in the dramatic events of the last week has at least ensured that the bond between coach and squad remains unbroken, while the players themselves may even have been energised by their misguided display of solidarity.

That at least is Eriksson's hope. "The players have created a very strong unity and I'm sure you will see that on Saturday," the Swede said.

The Turkey v England match will by 10:30 pm today (Saturday)

Whether the England players were as united over Ferdinand as it appeared was thrown into doubt on Friday when it was reported that captain David Beckham had opposed using the boycottthreat.

And the folly of their action was underlined by the first reliable opinion poll on the Ferdinand row which showed 70 percent of England supporters backed the FA's decision to drop

If this week's events do provide England with an extra note of steel, Eriksson can take heart from the fact that the backbone of his side will be

composed of players who were in the frontline of the battle.

David James will be in goal, Gary Neville and Sol Campbell in defence and Beckham and his former Manchester United colleagues Paul Scholes and Nicky Butt in midfield.

But Eriksson faces a difficult decision about what to do with his attack. Owen's absence seems to make Wayne Rooney a virtual certain starter, particularly given the way he terrorised the Turkish defence when England won 2-0 in Sunderland in April.

But who should he be paired with? The physical presence of an Emile Heskey or a James Beattie or the pace and mobility of Darius Vassell, who could exploit one of Turkey's few weaknesses, a lack of speed at the back.

Turkey in contrast are virtually at full strength following Hakan Sukur's recovery from injury and have been able to spend the week basking in Eriksson and England's discomfort.

"They have their problems, we know that," their coach Senol Gunes acknowledged. "But we can't think about that. All we have to think about is going on the pitch and winning.



SORRY, CAN'T ALLOW YOU! English fans Paul Ryder (2nd L) and Ceith Kirkhan (2nd R) are deported by Turkish police inside Attaturk airport in Istanbul on October 9.

You are not welcome'

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish police sent another England fan back to Britain after stopping him from entering Turkey, security sources said here on Friday.

lan John Wender was intercepted by Turkish police as the intense security measures put in place for the potentially explosive Euro 2004 qualifier between Turkey and England on Saturday began to

bare fruit. On Thursday night, Paul Ryder and Keith Kirkham were accosted at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport from Manchester and were sent back to London.

The names of the three men figured on a list of 1,000 troublemakers that English police had handed over to Turkish colleagues.

Fearing a repetition of the violence that has often marred games between Turkish and English sides, the English Football Association elected not to take up any tickets for the match and has urged supporters to stay home, but British police have warned that a hard core of fans are determined to travel to Turkey.

Sukru Saracoglu stadium on Saturday

Spectators will be allowed into the

Van Gaal back with Ajax

AFP, Amsterdam

Louis van Gaal has been appointed technical director at Ajax, the club he coached to Champions League success in 1995.

"I'm returning to my nest, to my club," said the former manager of the Dutch national team. Van Gaal, who will be working

alongside Ajax coach Ronald Koeman, indicated that this would be his final job before retirement.

Ajax are lying second in their group in the first round stage of this season's Champions League competition.

Patching up the wound

AFP, London

Manchester United and the English Football Association have held peace talks in an attempt to restore relations damaged by the Rio Ferdinand case.

United were incensed at the FA's handling of Ferdinand who was dropped from the England squad after missing a drugs test.

FA chief executive Mark Palios and his United counterpart David Gill have been in touch over the past 24 hours and it is believed the club will not be pursuing any legal action.

An FA source confirmed there had been "positive conversations" between the governing body and the

United have also told the FA that refusing to host England games.

United communications director Paddy Harverson said Friday: "While we have had our differences over this affair, we do look forward to working with the FA in a constructive and cooperative manner in the future in a whole number of areas.

"It's important that the club and the governing body of this country have a good working relationship."

United are keen to see changes to the FA's drug testing authority to prevent a repeat of the Ferdinand affair in which the player's name which should have remained confidential was effectively named when he was left out of the England squad.



PHOTO: AFP A MUSLIM PIONEER: Lale Orta, Turkey's first female referee and recent entry to the UEFA's list of "first class" football referees, in Istanbul on October 7. Orta is also the first internationa female referee from a predominantly



The final countdown



Although focus is firmly fixed on the blood and thunder clash between England and Turkey in Istanbul, there are a number of other top teams who will scramble for a ticket to Portugal next summer when the final round of Euro 2004 qualifying takes place on Saturday.

Having decided against boycotting their potentially volatile clash against Turkey in Istanbul as the row over the exclusion of Rio Ferdinand

> **FIXTURES** Saturday's final round of Euro 2004 qualifying matches:

Group 1 At Limassol Cyprus v Slovenia At Paris France v Israel Group 2 At Oslo

Norway v Luxembourg At Saraievo Bosnia-Herzegovina v Denmark Group 3 At Vienna Austria v Czech Republic

> At Eindhoven Netherlands v Moldova Group 4 At Solna Sweden v Latvia At Budapest

Hungary v Poland Group 5 At Glasgow Scotland v Lithuania At Hamburg Germany v Iceland Group 6

Greece v Northern Ireland At Yerevan Armenia v Spain Group 7

Turkey v England At Vaduz Liechtenstein v Slovakia Group 8 At Zagreb

Croatia v Bulgaria At Liege Belgium v Estonia Group 9

At Reggio Calabria Italy v Azerbaijan At Cardiff Wales v Serbia and Montenegro Group 10

At Moscow Russia v Georgia At Basel Switzerland v Republic of Ireland

raged during the week, England must now focus their attention on the job in hand - securing the point they need to win Group Seven.

If they do that, Sven-Goran Eriksson's men will avoid the lottery of the play-offs, the fate facing those countries who fail to top any of the ten qualifying groups.

Holders France, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Bulgaria are the only teams already guaranteed places in the finals next year along with hosts Portugal.

That leaves six other top spots still to be decided while runners-up go into the two-legged play-offs.

Holland, who have already booked a play-off spot as runnersup behind the Czechs in Group 3. play Moldova but they won't want to miss out on the finals after suffering the humiliation of failing to qualify for last year's World Cup.

The losing finalists there. Germany, had been expected to storm through Group 5 but a stuttering draw against Iceland leaves them still needing at least a draw against the same opponents to win the group.

Providing Germany achieve that. Scotland would take a playoff spot if they defeat Lithuania at home.

West Ham's Christian Dailly hopes to play in that match even though he is waiting for the birth of his fourth child. "Mrs Dailly is hanging on, Mr

again showing his feelings for his country and he is an outstanding professional," said Scots' assistantmanager Tommy Burns. Italy appear to have done the hard part in thrashing long-time

Dailly told me today. Christian is

Group 9 leaders Wales 4-0 in the last round of matches and will be expecting to easily beat Azerbaijan to seal top place. The Welsh, just one point behind, host Serbia and

Montenegro knowing that they are guaranteed at least a playoff place but if Wales win and Italy lose, Wales will qualify for their first international finals since 1958. Wales star Robert Earnshaw has

not written off little Azerbaijan's chances of creating an upset in Italy. "We need to win and hopefully there is that little miracle waiting to happen in Italy," said the Cardiff

"Azerbaijan were not that bad at all when we played them, they pulled off a great draw in Serbia and beat them at home, which really helped us."

Spain are another European giant on uncertain ground as they trail Greece by a point in Group 6. To avoid the playoffs, Raul and company must win in Armenia and

hone the Greeks slip up at home to

bottom side Northern Ireland.

has shaken their confidence ahead of what is expected to be a pas-

> Switzerland head Group 10 with 12 points, with Russia and Ireland on 11, and a draw would be good enough for the Swiss who have already won 2-1 in Dublin.

"Any team that comes to Ireland and wins cannot be taken lightly and we'll be giving them the respect they deserve," said defender Gary Breen.

THE EQUATION

Group 3

The final round of Euro 2004 qualifiers takes place on Saturday with the ten group winners guaranteed places in the finals in Portugal next summer.

The ten runners-up will have to play-off over two legs on November 15-16 and November 18-19.

HOW THEY STAND: Group 1 Winners - France Play-offs - Slovenia

Group 2 Winners - one from Romania Denmark, Bosnia Herzegovina Play-offs - one from Romania Denmark, Bosnia Herzegovina or

Winners - Czech Republic Play-offs - Holland Group 4 Winners - Sweden Play-offs - one from Latvia, Poland or Hungary

Group 5 Winners - Germany or Iceland Play-offs - one from Germany, Scotland or Iceland Group 6 Winners - one from Greece or

Spain Play-offs - one from Greece or Spain Group 7 Winners - one from England or

Turkey Play-offs - one from England or Turkey Group 8 Winners - Bulgaria

Play-offs - one from Belgium or

Group 9 Winners - one from Italy or Wales Play-offs - one from Italy or Wales Group 10 Winners - one from Russia, Switzerland or Republic of Ireland

zerland or Republic of Ireland

* Portugal qualify automatically as hosts

Play-offs - one from Russia, Swit-

Rape probe

Two more in custody

AFP, London

A 22-vear-old man and a 19-vearold man have been arrested in connection with an allegation by a teenage girl that she was gang raped, reportedly by several English Premiership footballers in a London hotel, police said Friday.

Both men were arrested after appearing voluntarily at a London police station and were being quizzed "in connection with an allegation of rape and sexual assault made by a 17-year-old female," the Metropolitan Police said in a press statement.

The police did not mention whether the arrested men were football players.

The latest arrests bring to four the number of men questioned by police over the allegation. It has been reported in the British

press that the girl agreed to have sex with one man, but was then attacked by up to seven others -including Premiership players -- at the upmarket Grosvenor House Hotel on September 27.

An unnamed 27-year-old man who is understood not to be a footballer was arrested Thursday and quizzed by detectives before being released on bail On Wednesday, the police said

they had arrested 29-year-old party organiser Nicholas Meikle in con-

Meikle, whose lawyer denied the claims on his behalf, was bailed until later this month while police inquiries continue. Meikle told a British Sunday

newspaper that he was with a group of Premiership players being investigated in the alleged attack, and insisted the girl had consented to have sex with him, another man and two Premiership players. "They are obviously pleased

things are starting to happen at last," public relations consultant Max Clifford, who is advising the girl's family, said Thursday.

"They just hope that the gap in between hasn't made it more difficult for the police to be successful in proving the case.'

Chelsea want Lucio

AFP, Leverkusen

Bayer Leverkusen general manager Ilia Kaenzig has confirmed that Chelsea have entered the race to sign their Brazilian World Cup winner Lucio.

The big-spending Londoners backed by billionaire oil magnate Roman Abramovich - are reaching for the cheque book once again with 15-million-euro rated Lucio the next

"It is true that Chelsea have registered their interest in Lucio, Kaenzig told Sport 1. "But we do not want to let Lucio

go as early as the winter break." Serie A titans Juventus are also long-term admirers of the 25-yearold defensive pillar and Bayer know the market value of their prized

"Every club that wants to sign Lucio must realise that he is world class," added Kaenzig.

asset.

Money appears to be no object under Chelsea's Roman empire with 111 million pounds (175.5m dollars) already spent on new players - but Leverkusen may use Chelsea's interest in Lucio to lure Finnish striker Mickael Forssell, on loan at Birmingham City, away from Stamford Bridge.

"We have not lost contact," explained sporting director Jurgen Kohler. "We are still interested in

One for the rumour mill refusing to join attempts to get the on Friday claimed Eriksson had



AFP, Istanbul

Sven-Goran Eriksson on Friday fuelled speculation about his future as England coach by refusing to categorically refute suggestions the Euro 2004 qualifier against Turkey could be his last match in charge. As fresh reports linking him to

the manager's job at Chelsea surfaced in the English and Swedish media, Eriksson declined an opportunity to kill off reports that Saturday's match could bring down the curtain on his three-year reign as England coach. Eriksson, who is under contract with England until after the 2006

World Cup, insisted that his position had not changed in recent days - an ambiguous statement which left open the possibility that a decision on his future had been made prior to that. "If you take the position I had one week ago, nothing has

changed until today so I don't think

should talk about that the day

before a very important match against Turkey," the Swede told a press conference. Football Association (FA) officials then stepped in to insist that Eriksson would not respond to

further questions on the issue. Eriksson's relationship with his employers at FA has deteriorated badly this week following the governing body's decision to drop Rio Ferdinand from the squad for missing a random drugs test.

The England coach made it clear he had opposed the decision and then angered FA chiefs by

players to drop their subsequent threat to boycott the match in protest at the handling of the Ferdinand affair.

Despite his success in guiding England to the quarter-finals of last summer's World Cup -- where they



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON

were beaten 2-1 by Brazil in Eriksson's only defeat in a competitive match -- Eriksson reportedly hankers after a return to club management.

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson has claimed that the Swede was being lined up as his successor at Old Trafford and he been persistently linked to the Chelsea job since being photographed outside the London home of Roman Abramovich in July.

Ahramovich a Russian oil tycoon who bought Chelsea weeks before the meeting, is believed to have identified Eriksson as the best candidate to take over from the current manager Claudio Ranieri.

Reports in the Swedish media

already signed an agreement with Chelsea committing him to talk to them first should he leave the England job

Even if England manage to get

the point they need against Turkey

to qualify for next summer's Euro 2004 fináls in Portugal, few people in English football believe Eriksson will continue beyond the tourna-The Swede admitted that the events of the last week had placed

a strain on himself and the players, but he insisted it had, if anything, only strengthened their resolve. "It is a different way to build up to an important football match, but

my job has been to prepare the players." Eriksson said. "Everyone would have preferred another week, I cannot deny that. But football wise on the pitch it

has been very good. There shouldn't be any excuses for tomorrow." England's players acknowledged in a statement on Friday that their stance in defence of Ferdinand, widely ridiculed by both media and public, had left them under increased pressure to

deliver the right result on Saturday Eriksson voiced confidence that

they would do so. "The team are very much together," he said. "What has happened has happened but now the team has come through it as strong, if not even stronger than

But he was also resigned to the fact that he can expect to face a fresh torrent of criticism in the event of defeat.

"I'm quite sure about that but what's new about that?" Eriksson said. "If you lose a match you are slaughtered. I'm used to that.'



TILL DIVORCE DO US PART! A Reuters file photo of Romanian star forward Adrian Mutu (L) and his bride Alexandra talking with the legendary Gheorghe Hagi (R) on August 27, 2000 at their wedding ceremony in Bucharest.

Mutu's marriage breaks

Football

AP, Bucharest

Chelsea striker Adrian Mutu and his TV star wife divorced on Thursday after months of bickering between the two played out in the Romanian media.

Mutu and his wife Alexandra, a well-known personality in her home country, married in 2000, and were considered one of Romania's most glamorous couples. They have a 1-year-old son, Mario Alexandru.

A Bucharest court ruled the

both sides were equally guilty for the end of the three-year marriage. No reason was given for the Alexandra, 22, was awarded

divorce final, and declared that

custody of Mario Alexandru, while Mutu, 24, has unlimited visiting

Mutu will pay his ex-wife euro2,500 (US\$2,955) monthly in alimony, said Alexandra's lawyer, Catalin Dancu, adding that Alexandra intends to again go by

her maiden name. Dinu. She also gets to keep the house the couple shared in Bucharest and a luxury car

Mutu was not present in court on Thursday. Romanian newspapers have been riveted by the breakup of the

couple, with reports of domestic

violence and infidelities on both

Since moving to Italy in 2000, Mutu played for Inter Milan, Verona and Parma. He transferred to Chelsea in August.

Alexandra followed Mutu to Italy, giving up a job as broadcaster

on a weekly motor show on Romania's Pro TV. In Italy, she presented a show on local station Parma TV called "Radio Break."