

Latvia make an Englishman smile

AFP, Yeovil

Deep in sleepy south-west England, Latvia's progress to the finals of Euro 2004 was being cheered by at least one man.

Gary Johnson, the coach of humble third division side Yeovil, was in charge of the Latvian national team four years ago where he had current boss Alex Starkovs working alongside him.

"It's a magnificent feeling, a major achievement. Four years ago I took over the job of national coach and technical director. The brief was to put the Latvians on the European map," said Johnson.

"I took them to through the 2002 World Cup qualifiers and each month we progressed.

"So to see these boys - they were boys when I was in charge - get to a European championship so quickly is absolutely unbelievable.

"When I took over as national coach, Alex Starkovs took over with me. He was my number two. I set up the programme with him and he has carried it on."

Latvia drew 2-2 with Turkey on Wednesday to give them a 3-2 play-off aggregate win and a place in the European finals for the first time.



PHOTO: AFP

DARLING OF THE NATION: Latvian forward Maris Verpakovskis (R) is greeted by ecstatic fans upon his arrival at Riga airport on November 20. The Baltic state held celebrations yesterday for their national team whose 2-2 draw against Turkey in Istanbul secured the country's first appearance in the European Championships final next year in Portugal. Verpakovskis scored in that match.

Premiership preview
Gunners have job cut out

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal and their players have already shelled out a grand total of 265,000 pounds in fines as a result of the ugly fracas that erupted at the end of an ill-tempered draw with Manchester United in September.

On Saturday, the Premiership leaders will start to discover whether they will pay an even greater price for their indiscipline in the hard currency of points.

Bans imposed in tandem with the fines mean manager Arsene Wenger will have to do without captain Patrick Vieira, fellow midfielder Ray Parlour and defenders Martin Keown and Lauren for an awkward trip to fifth-placed Birmingham.

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has claimed Arsenal got off lightly as part of a deal with the Football Association chiefs.

The likelihood of such connivance however is diminished by the fact that Vieira and Parlour will be absent for a match that a third central midfielder, Gilberto, will also be missing.

After playing for his country in Wednesday's World Cup qualifier against Uruguay, the Brazilian will not

have sufficient time to recover from the combined effects of the match, a 12-hour flight to London and his jet-lag.

With the Gunners facing a must-win Champions League encounter next week, Wenger has decided in advance that Gilberto, who scored an own goal in Brazil's 3-3 draw, will have the weekend off.

"Gilberto will come back Friday afternoon and we have had bad experiences with players coming back," the Frenchman told Arsenal.com.

"We play on Tuesday night at Inter Milan so I don't think it will be a good situation for Saturday or the midweek game."

Wenger admits the absence of Lauren and Keown, who are beginning four and three-match bans respectively, has also given him a major headache.

"We have no problem in offensive areas but I have a big problem in midfield and at the back because Lauren, Parlour, Vieira, Gilberto, and Keown are not available.

In defence, Wenger has the choice of bringing in 18-year-old Justin Hoyte at right back or moving Kolo Toure there with Pascal Cygan slotting in at centre back but in midfield he admits he is scraping the bottom of the barrel.

The only bright spot for the Arsenal boss is that title rivals Manchester United and Chelsea will also feel the jet

lag factor this weekend.

Chelsea duo Hernan Crespo and Juan Veron were both involved in Argentina's 1-1 draw in Colombia and are unlikely to figure in Claudio Ranieri's starting line-up at Southampton.

Ranieri does however have Eidur Gudjohnsen and Damien Duff fresh and raring.

Iceland's captain Gudjohnsen opted not to travel for his country's midweek friendly with Mexico in San Francisco while Duff scored a superb solo goal in Ireland's 3-0 win over Canada on Tuesday.

United striker Diego Forlan scored twice for Uruguay against Brazil but will have been back in England for less than 24 hours by the time his club kick-off against Blackburn in a lunchtime match at Old Trafford.

As a result, Ruud van Nistelrooy is set to play his third game in eight days but after scoring a hat-trick for Holland in their 6-0 Euro 2004 play-off romp against Scotland on Wednesday, the Dutchman is sure to be flying.

Gary Neville is doubtful for United as a result of a niggling Achilles problem which he aggravated playing in England's friendly defeat by Denmark on Sunday.

At the non-jet-setting end of the table, Eddie Gray begins his stint as Leeds

caretaker manager with the kind of game his side must win if they are to escape relegation and potential financial meltdown - a home clash with Bolton.

Gray's first act on taking over was to mend fences with Mark Viduka, who had publicly fallen out with former boss Peter Reid. Gray believes getting the best out of the Australian is the key to realising his ambition of making Elland Road an unwelcoming destination for visitors.

"They are coming here thinking if we play properly we'll win the game, but I want them thinking we're going to be under severe pressure for 90 minutes. That's what we've got to instill in the players again."

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday: Birmingham v Arsenal, Everton v Wolves, Leeds v Bolton, Leicester v Charlton, Manchester Utd v Blackburn (1230 GMT), Middlesbrough v Liverpool, Newcastle v Manchester City, Southampton v Chelsea
Sunday: Tottenham v Aston Villa (1605 GMT)
Monday: Fulham v Portsmouth (2000 GMT)

Primera Liga preview
No time to act Goofy!

Football

AFP, Madrid

In the week that Real Madrid inked a marketing deal with Disney, it was appropriate that the talk was of the reigning Spanish champions avoiding another Mickey Mouse display against Albacete on Sunday.

Real's last outing two weeks ago saw them crash 4-1 at Sevilla, with jokes after Real went three down in 15 minutes that Donald Duck and Goofy could have done better than Beckham, Zidane and Ronaldo, and they need an emphatic win to restore morale and keep up their championship challenge.

Deportivo La Coruna lead the lead with 25 points after 11 games with Valencia, who travel to struggling Murcia on Sunday, and Real second and third respectively with 23 points but separated by goal difference.

"Everybody is saying that Albacete should be a push over but there have been enough surprises in the league so far this season. I just hope there is not another one on Sunday," said Real defender Francisco Pavon on Thursday.

Turkey games postponed

AFP, Paris

UEFA announced Thursday that next week's Champions League Group D tie between Turkish side Galatasaray and Italy's Juventus has been postponed until December 2 because of security fears.

European football's governing body said that the decision was taken following Thursday's suicide bomb attacks against British interests in Istanbul which killed 26 people and injured 450.

The UEFA Cup second round second-leg tie between Israel's Maccabi Haifa and Spanish side Valencia, due to take place next Thursday at the Alsancak Stadium in Izmir, has also been postponed.

The new date and venue for the match, which was moved to Turkey because of security concerns in Israel, has yet to be fixed.

"UEFA has decided to postpone the most imminent matches coming up in UEFA competitions in Turkey next week, given the seriousness of the incidents that took place in Istanbul this morning and the current confusion on the ground," said UEFA's director of competition operations, Jacob Erel.

"Over the next few days, we will be closely monitoring the overall security situation in Turkey, together with the relevant authorities, and will remain in constant contact with the clubs and national associations concerned regarding any forthcoming matches scheduled in Turkey."

English Premiership club Chelsea were waiting to hear if they will play their Champions League match against Besiktas next month in Istanbul.

Anderson

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one-day international when they were bowled out for 88 -- their second lowest total.

Anderson had recently returned to the squad having missed the Bangladesh Tests because of a knee injury.

Yorkshire's Matthew Hoggard, who joins the rest of the Test squad, will provide fast-bowling cover for James Kirtley and Richard Johnson in Sunday's third ODI, also in Colombo.

Kirtley, Anderson's squash opponent when he sustained the injury, is now likely to stay on for the Test series.

Time to get

FROM PAGE 13
eight matches against Australia and Pakistan.

Wright said it was crucial that skipper Saurav Ganguly and his men issued a statement of intent on the opening day of the first Test.

The Indians are well aware of the mistake then England skipper Nasser Hussain made last summer when he gave Australia the psychological upper hand by bowling first in Brisbane after winning the toss.

Ganguly, who missed out most of the TVS Cup tri-series due to injury, is one player whom the coach is desperately hoping will recover in time to make the trip.

"We are hoping that he will be alright before the tour begins," Wright said.

"It's a minor injury. He should even have no problem in playing the two three-day games ahead of the Tests."

For India, it will be vitally important that Ganguly remains fit to lead out the team given the tremendous fighting spirit that he manages to instill in the side.

India's tour begins with a three-day game against Victoria starting on Tuesday, before heading north for a final warm-up match against a Queensland XI.

The odds suggest Real, who have a perfect record in the Santiago Bernabeu this campaign, should have no trouble overcoming their relegation-threatened visitors, who have yet to get an away point.

However, Real coach Carlos Queiroz will have spent the past day or so pondering what to do about the centre of the defence now that it looks like all of his players on midweek international duty have returned unscathed.

Michel Salgado will return at right back after suspension with Pavon moving back into the middle of the defence alongside Spanish international Ivan Helguera, while Raul Bravo continues to deputise for the injured Roberto Carlos at left back.

Deportivo may have a two point lead at the top of the Spanish first division but their recent performances have been far from convincing and they only won their last game 2-1 thanks to two own goals by visiting Real Sociedad.

In such form, the Galicians will hardly relish their trip to the other end of Spain to play Real Betis, even though the mercurial Seville-based side's home form is actually worse than their away record.

One note of comfort for Deportivo is that Betis are in the midst of an injury

crisis, deepened this week by Brazilian midfielder Denilson joining Washington Tais and Tote Lopez among the principal casualties.

Former international Ito Alvarez is also suspended for the visit of Deportivo.

Betis coach Victor Fernandez started with the ineffectual Dani Martin in place of Tote when they lost 2-1 at Barcelona two weeks ago but the indications are that the erratic Martin Palermo may be given another chance against Deportivo.

After their spluttering start, Barcelona have now gone four games without losing and moved up to fourth place but they will have to face Villarreal on Saturday without Ronaldinho, who tore a right leg muscle against Betis.

The fixture also brings Barca face-to-face with Argentine international midfielder Juan Ramon Riquelme, who was discarded by the Catalans at the end of the summer and loaned to Villarreal.

"I don't have any particular feelings of revenge. OK, there were plenty of things that happened that I don't want to talk about, and I'd prefer not to remember, and four months ago I thought I'd have been playing for Barca rather than against them, but I still had

more-or-less a happy year there," reflected Riquelme.

Behind Barca in fifth are Atletico Madrid, who boast the best current record in the Spanish first division after winning their last five games.

Atletico play at Valladolid, who themselves are unbeaten in four games, on Sunday and to acquire a bit of divine assistance in maintaining their best streak in eight seasons Atletico went to Rome on Wednesday for an audience with the Pope.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off GMT): Real Sociedad v Real Mallorca (1830), Real Betis v Deportivo La Coruna (1830), Villarreal v Barcelona (2030)
Sunday: Celta Vigo v Athletic Bilbao (1600), Espanyol v Sevilla (1600), Malaga v Osasuna (1600), Racing Santander v Real Zaragoza (1600), Valladolid v Atletico Madrid (1600), Real Madrid v Albacete (1800), Murcia v Valencia (2000)

Serie A preview
Tests for big boys

Football

AFP, Rome

The top three in Italy, all boasting unbeaten records after nine matches played, face tricky away ties this weekend as Serie A returns to action following a two week break for international matches.

Current league leaders Juventus visit Modena, Roma travel to Bologna and AC Milan take on seventh-placed Chievo. Juve are on 23 points, two ahead of their two closest title rivals who are tied for second place.

European champions Milan face the sternest test in Verona where they have taken one point from the last two meetings, but they can take encouragement from Chievo's poor home record this season.

Just one win in four at the Bentegodi stadium has offset their superb away form which has brought three wins, but Milan striker Jon Dahl Tomasson said it would be a mistake to underestimate Luigi Del Neri's men well-drilled men.

"We will be up against a team that plays some of the best football in Italy," said the 27-year-old Danish international.

"Del Neri is one of the most intelligent coaches around and his players know exactly what is expected of them. He has his game plan which the team follow closely.

calling it a day," he said.

"I don't know whether or not I will have a place in the starting eleven, but nobody here is assured of a place and nobody minds. We all happily accept the coach's decisions."

Roma meanwhile come face to face with their former coach Carlo Mazzone, a born and bred Roman.

The gruff-voiced 'grandad' of Italian football has always had a soft spot for the club he supported as a boy, but insisted sentiment will be pushed to one side on Sunday.

"I am a Roma fan but I have to be professional," said the 66-year-old. "I hope they win the title this season, but right now I am thinking of Bologna. We desperately need three points and to take them from Roma, who are in tremendous form right now, would be a massive boost for morale."

Bologna are currently fourth from bottom with just six points from a possible 27 this season.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Modena v Juventus (1700 GMT), Inter Milan v Reggina (1930)
Sunday (all matches 1400 unless stated): Roma v Brescia, Bologna v Ancona, Empoli v Parma, Lazio v Perugia, Lecce v Sampdoria, Udinese v Siena, Chievo v AC Milan (1930)

Poorly prepared

FROM PAGE 13
Sepp Blatter and Sultan.
According to the latest FIFA rankings Bangladesh are 147th compared to Tajikistan who are 180. But the hosts ought to be reminded that their opponents though lowly on paper, nevertheless, narrowly missed out on playing in Asian Cup recently.

TEAM

Goalkeepers: Aminul, Biplob; Defenders: Rajani, Sujon, Nazrul, Titoo, Hasan Al Mamun, Mahmudul Hasan; Midfielders: Joy, Arman, Parvez, Monwar, Motiur Munna, Biddiut, Saiful; Strikers: Alfaz, Farhad, Kanchan, Moni, Ujjal.

Cordoba's sudden bye

AFP, Barranquilla



Colombian goalkeeper Oscar Cordoba announced Thursday that he was retiring from the national side for personal reasons and not because of the crisis within the team.

Colombia drew 1-1 against Argentina here Wednesday but are still bottom of the South American World Cup qualifiers after losing their three previous matches.

"I took all week to make this decision," said 33-year-old Cordoba, whose howler during Wednesday's game allowed Hernan Crespo to give Argentina a 1-1 draw.

"I didn't take it to turn all the attention away from what is happening, it's something personal. I talked about it with my family and yesterday I wanted to have a great match against Argentina to help the team forward," added Cordoba, who plays for Turkish leader's Besiktas.

The draw however keeps coach Francisco Maturana in his post after the Colombia boss had been ready to call it quits if his side had lost again.

Don't rush

FROM PAGE 13
match figures of 7-100 in his comeback Sheffield Shield match, in which South Australia defeated NSW at Adelaide Oval.

"From an Australian point of view it was (encouraging), from a NSW point of view not so great," Waugh said.

"But he bowled very well, deserved his wickets, and worked hard and worked into it nicely.

"He bowled a lot of overs, I don't think he was at 100 per cent pace but I think he worked into it well."

Another Test bowler on the injury comeback trail, leg-spinner Stuart MacGill, in his second game back after a month off with a calf injury, was not in such good form in the SA-NSW match.

MacGill had match figures of 4-147 from 29.4 overs, which provided the SA batsmen with plenty of easy boundaries from half-pitched deliveries and full tosses, but Waugh said there were some promising signs.

"He was a little bit hot and cold in this match," he said.

"He hasn't bowled a lot before the last two weeks, then he's had a lot of bowling.

"One or two things were niggling away at him, he's got a sore toe.

"There were some encouraging signs there, but he wasn't consistent."

Clash

FROM PAGE 13
England are the world's number one side, deservedly so after beating all their main rivals in the past year. They have also defeated the Wallabies in their past four meetings.

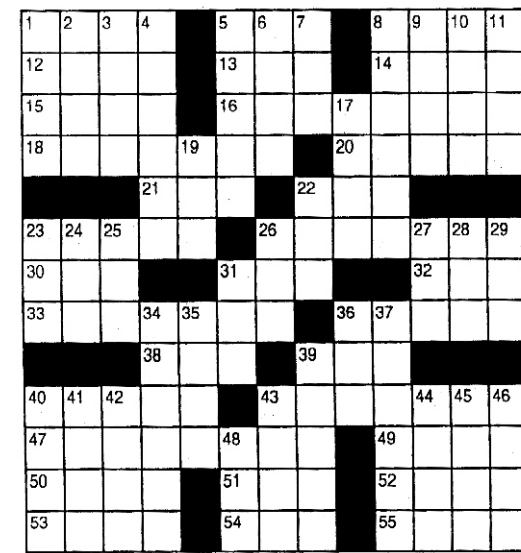
Most of the talk in Sydney this week has focused on England's reclusive flyhalf Jonny Wilkinson, who defied the elements to kick all England's points in the 24-7 win over France.

Obsessive is the adjective most commonly applied to Wilkinson, whose work ethic has been analysed relentlessly in the Australian media.

His critics say Wilkinson is no more than a left-footed Rob Andrew, the England flyhalf 12 years ago when Australia defeated England 12-6 at Twickenham, the only other time the two teams have met in a World Cup final.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
1 Unescorted
5 Individual
8 Corridor
12 'Clair de lune'
13 Howl at the moon
14 Lotion
15 Oppositive
16 Freeway bridge
18 Superintendent's means of entry
20 Defeat
21 Towel designation
22 Pres. monogram
23 'Get lost!'
26 Central idea
30 Debtor's letters
31 Tucker's partner?
32 Triumph-ed
33 Tablet
36 Demon
38 Forefront
39 Started
40 'Middle-march' author
43 Hasp holder
47 Major defense contractor
49 Actor
50 'Fish Magic'
51 Puncturing tool
52 Fashion talk
53 Back talk
54 Take advantage of a dragon
55 Dis-patched
22 Society new-comer
23 Submergion
24 Dove's call
25 Trench
1 Rebuff a masher
2 Albacore
3 Picnic crashers
4 Japanese entertainer
5 Reed instruments
6 Almost black
7 Socket contents
8 Occur
9 'Sad to tell, ...'
11 For fear that
17 Ex-mayor
18 Giuliani
19 Kipling hero
20 Society access-ory
21 B.P.O.E.
22 Show-girl
23 Manilow sang about
24 Summer-time desserts
25 Church furniture
26 Elliptical
27 Para-keet's place
28 Recognized
29 Perfume label
30 word



CRYPTOQUIP

R Y S D U Y Z N F N R D M Y C U
D F S K Y H J W R C K X D E
Y I P X D E Y , M Z C R W X D ' C
G R D E C U F G P Y H R E X J F K N .
W A L K E R T O O K O N E F A L S E S T E P , I G U E S S H E ' D F I N I S H U N D E R T H E W I R E .
T o d a y ' s C r y p t o q u i p C l u e : Y e q u a l s O

The Cryptokuip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Strachan linked to Leeds

AFP, London

Crisis club Leeds United were reported Friday to be set to make Gordon Strachan their new manager as soon as they reach agreement with Southampton over his pay-off.

Nedia reports said Elland Road chief executive Trevor Birch made an official approach to Saints supremo Rupert Lowe 48 hours ago.