

McClaren sees bright future

Football

REUTERS, London

Steve McClaren will start his reign as the next England manager brimming with self-confidence and the belief he can lead his team to trophy success.

Brushing aside the FA's abortive talks last week with Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari and his unpopularity with England fans in polls, McClaren was in bullish mood after being named as Sven-Goran Eriksson's successor on Thursday.

The Middlesbrough manager cited his experience as an assistant to Eriksson and previously to Alex Ferguson at Manchester United as key elements of a CV that has won him a four-year contract starting on Aug 1.

"I've got the knowledge, the experience, I've taken part in big games, won big games, been successful at whichever club I've been to and I've worked with the top players.

"And I think that's essential for this job," he told reporters. "It doesn't guarantee success, but I think it's essential going into it to have that experience, knowledge and confidence of working with the top players at top tournaments in top games -- and knowing what it takes to win.

"I believe I've developed that, and have had great help along the way, to make sure I sit here with the right credentials to take the job, to take it forward and to be successful."

McClaren, who was at United when they lifted the 1999 European Cup in their Treble-winning season, clearly had an edge over his English rivals, Sam Allardyce of Bolton Wanderers and outgoing Charlton Athletic boss Alan Curbishley.

It was of no concern to the 45-year-old that, given the FA's pursuit of Scolari, he may not have been their first choice.

"The FA had to pick the right man for the job and I believe they have," he said. "That's all that matters. "This is the proudest day of my

life...once the opportunity came, there was no way I was going to turn it down."

Dismissing polls which indicated he was not a popular choice among England fans, he said: "It's not an issue for me.

"You have ups and downs, good opinions and bad opinions, and it changes week to week, game to game.

"But overall, I am very proud of my record as a coach, as a manager and I have that self-belief that I think you need to bring to a job with a stature like this."

There was only one way to deal with those sceptical of his appointment, McClaren said.

"Win football matches, do well in tournaments and over the period of my contract win a major tournament.

"We do have a possibility with this squad over the next four years of winning a major tournament. I definitely believe that."

McClaren, who has guided Boro to next week's UEFA Cup final against Sevilla and is helping Eriksson prepare for the World Cup, recognises those who have helped him.

Though he has learned from being Eriksson's assistant for several years, he said: "Working with Sir Alex at the top level for three years was the breakthrough for my career.

"Working at that level, with the top players, gave me the belief and the confidence to work with those players...with England, in big tournaments and big games I've learnt so much."

Though he revealed that the job had been offered to him on Tuesday, ahead of Thursday's FA Board meeting, McClaren gave few insights into how he would shape his England.

He would not be drawn on David Beckham's future as England captain, though his endorsement of the Real Madrid midfielder was hardly ringing.

"That is something I don't want to discuss here, I don't think it's right to discuss here," he said. "We've got a World Cup coming up...and he's captain at the present moment under Sven."

McClaren's appointment ended a difficult week for the FA, whose chief executive Brian Barwick was mauled by sections of the press over his handling of Scolari, who pulled out of the race on Friday citing media intrusion.

"It made for a couple of difficult days for us, and then we moved on," Barwick said. "He was a person we had a great deal of interest in but we also had a great deal of interest in several other candidates...we never offered him a contract."



Steve McClaren signs the contract to become England's new manager, succeeding Sven-Goran Eriksson, at the Football Association's headquarters in London on Thursday.

Asked if the criticism had made him consider resigning, Barwick said: "Of course, I didn't.

"It was quite tough to read some of it. It was definitely full-on criticism of the Football Association over the weekend, and by association, my tenureship as chief executive.

"Some of the stuff was very pointed, very difficult to read. Some of it was unfair and some was probably fair."

Mourinho after Tevez?

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Corinthians denied that Chelsea were chasing striker Carlos Tevez after Jose Mourinho, coach of the English champions, was among the crowd for their game against River Plate on Thursday.

"It's got nothing to do with Tevez," said Kia Joorabchian, the president of London-based Media Sports Investments who have invested millions of dollars in Corinthians.

"Mourinho is on holiday and can do what he wants," Joorabchian told Brazilian media. "This visit has nothing to do with our player."

Corinthians, the Brazilian champions, signed the Argentina forward from Boca Juniors in 2004 for a South American record fee of 18 million dollars.

Mourinho refused to make any comment, saying only that he had come to watch the game.

Fowler extends L'pool contract

AFP, London

Robbie Fowler has extended his contract at English Premiership giants Liverpool for another season after agreeing to sign a new one-year contract.

The former England striker has scored four league goals since returning to the club in January on a six-month contract but is now linked with Anfield until the end of the 2006/07 season.

He was signed by Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez after spending four years away from Anfield with Manchester City and Leeds.

Penalties if season extended

REUTERS, Madrid

A postponed Spanish league match between Barcelona and Sevilla is causing a fixture conflict due to FIFA's directive that the season must end by May 15.

The Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) has threatened stiff penalties for a breach of the directive allowing national teams time to prepare for the World Cup after the league (LFP) asked FIFA for an extension until May 20.

Playing the match, postponed on April 23 due to a waterlogged pitch, would be difficult with Sevilla meeting Middlesbrough in the UEFA Cup final on May 10. Barcelona face Arsenal in the Champions League final on May 17.

The two full rounds of matches remaining in the Spanish league this season are scheduled for this weekend and May 13/14.

FIFA did give permission for the Sevilla-Barcelona match alone to be played on May 20 without World Cup players but the result could have a bearing on European qualification. The LFP have lodged an appeal against FIFA's decision in a Zurich court.

The clubs want the match played on May 13 and the final round of games to take place the following weekend with the involvement of international players.

They complain Sevilla would have an unfair advantage on May 20 because champions Barca will be short of most of their first-team squad who are involved in the World Cup.

Lewis reminds selectors

AFP, Worcester

Jon Lewis bolstered his prospects of playing in next week's first Test against Sri Lanka by taking six wickets for England A on the opening day of their match against the tourists at New Road here Thursday.

Gloucestershire seamer Lewis took six for 49 as Sri Lanka were bowled out for 179.

With England quicks Stephen Harmison (shin) and James Anderson (back) ruled out ahead of Sunday's team announcement for the Lord's Test, and Glamorgan reverse swing specialist Simon Jones (knee) doubtful, Lewis's salvo was well-timed particularly as the chairman of selectors, David Graveney, was on hand to witness it.

"It's an England A team game against the tourists and if you get wickets then you're obviously in with a shout of getting into the full side," said Lewis, yet to play Test cricket.

However, after missing out on England's tours of Pakistan and India, Lewis added: "I feel I can probably do a job anywhere and I'm happy bowling on any sort of wicket. I'm not just an early season bowler in England."



Vitolo of Racing Santander (R) tries to hold off Real Madrid forward Robinho during their Primera Liga match in Santander on Thursday.

PRIMERA LIGA

Real go second

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid regained second spot in the Spanish first division with a 3-2 win at Racing Santander on Thursday, but had to survive a late fight back as the struggling hosts got two goals in the last 15 minutes.

Brazil's World Cup-bound left back Roberto Carlos opened the scoring for Real from the penalty spot after 33 minutes, following a foul by Racing defender Pablo Pinillos on Robinho.

Robinho had fallen to the ground after the tackle from Pinillos but referee Javier Turienzo Alvarez dismissed the hosts' protests that the Brazilian had exaggerated the impact of a legal challenge.

Real then seemed to put themselves firmly on the road to their third successive victory when Roberto Soldado, the Spanish

second division's top scorer for Real Madrid's reserve team but starting his first league game for the senior side, got their second goal just before the hour.

Soldado slid in to connect with a cross from Raul Gonzalez after Roberto Carlos had made a defence-splitting run which left the Racing defenders still in their blocks.

Robinho added a third with a fierce right foot shot from 20 yards after 69 minutes but then Racing suddenly woke up and almost salvaged a point in a fraught final 15 minutes for Real.

Sergio Matabuena got one back for Racing after 75 minutes, tapping home a loose ball after a corner and Racing had two other good chances just go wide before the midfielder got his and his team's second of the night two minutes into injury time.

Real now have 69 points from 36 games and two games to go, one place and one point ahead of 2004

champions Valencia, who lost 2-1 at Real Mallorca on Wednesday.

By contrast, Racing are just one point and one place above the relegation zone.

Barcelona became champions for the second successive year on Wednesday when Valencia's defeat gave the Catalan club an unbeatable lead at the top of the Spanish league.

Real Madrid's bitter rivals then went on to show their class by winning 1-0 at Ceita Vigo, the only goal of the game coming from Samuel Eto'o after 55 minutes.

Eto'o took his tally for the season to 25 goals and remains on course to lift the Pichichi prize for the first division's top goal getter.

Osasuna stay in fourth, with 65 points, but keep in contention for a Champions League place for the first time after their 1-0 win at Atletico Madrid on Wednesday.

Gatlin chases new world record

AFP, Osaka

Olympic champion sprinter Justin Gatlin of the United States will run his first 100-meter sprint of the season here this weekend with his sights set on smashing the world record.

Chinese hurdling sensation and world record holder Liu Xiang will also participate in the IAAF Japan Grand Prix along with reigning female 200m champion Allyson Felix of the United States.

Gatlin, the winner of the 100m gold, the 4x100m relay silver and the 200m bronze medals at the 2004 Athens Olympics, will make his first individual start of the season in Osaka.

His relay team clinched a second place finish in the 4x100m at the Mount San Antonio College Relays on April 16 in California.

"I think Osaka is a great stepping stone to a good season. Last year, I came to Osaka and had a great season," he told a press conference.

"This year, I want to start at Osaka and do the same thing I did last year. I want to... stay on top of it and be the world's number one," he said.

He has previously expressed confidence that he can set the world record and top last year's performance, when he became just the second man ever to win both the 100m and 200m at the same World Championships, held in Helsinki.

Gatlin has declared his goal this year is to run 100 meters in 9.75 seconds and break the world record of 9.77 held by Jamaica's Asafa Powell.

He has said he has no problem getting motivated for the outdoor season, even though there are no Olympics or World Championships in 2006.

Gatlin added the Osaka meet should provide him with an opportunity to prepare for the 2007 World Championship to be held in the western Japanese city.

"I feel that this year is a big year because this is a step to the 2007 Osaka World Championship," he said.

"The World Championship will be a great place to improve my record. That's what I am working on right now," he said.

Liu had a disappointing injury-wracked season last year, despite winning silver at the Helsinki World Championships.

He was also hit by an injury earlier this year and is looking for a return to form starting in Osaka.

"I have not been able to practice. For tomorrow, I am somewhat concerned about my time. But I will give my best," he said through a translator.

PREMIERSHIP

Gunners closing on Spurs

Football

REUTERS, London

Two goals from Jose Antonio Reyes gave Arsenal a 3-1 win at Manchester City on Thursday and closed the gap on Tottenham Hotspur to a point in the battle for the final Champions League qualifying spot.

Substitute Reyes slotted home from Emmanuel Eboue's cross in the 78th minute and six minutes later bent the ball left-footed around City goalkeeper David James into the top corner.

Fifth-placed Arsenal have 64 points with one game to play. They host Wigan on Sunday in the final match at their Highbury ground, while north London rivals Tottenham travel to FA Cup finalists West Ham.

Even if they finish in fifth spot, Arsene Wenger's team could still make the Champions League next

season if they beat Barcelona in the final of the competition on May 17.

Arsenal's cause, as well as England's World Cup hopes, were given a boost with left back Ashley Cole making his first start since last October.

The defender, who has suffered foot, thigh and ankle injuries, played the full 90 minutes, watched by England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson.

"The good news is that it was 90 minutes at high pace and he came through well," Wenger told Sky Sports. "He finished very tired he said, but it's good news."

Wenger played down the importance of having already qualified for next season's Champions League ahead of this month's final saying he was not sure it would ease the pressure on his players.

"When you go into a Champions League final you want to win the game and that's all. You do not think about the rest, you just want to win the game on the day and that's what

we want to do," he said.

Fredrik Ljungberg broke the deadlock for Arsenal in the 30th minute with his first Premier League goal of the season after Thierry Henry, surrounded by City defenders, had slipped the ball to the Swede.

Poor defending from Arsenal allowed the home team to equalise eight minutes later when Joey Barton's corner was headed towards goal by Trevor Sinclair. Goalkeeper Jens Lehmann missed it and defender David Sommeil tapped the ball in from close range.

"(The fight for fourth) could have ended tonight but we didn't want that," Henry said. "It's still in their (Tottenham's) hands if they win at West Ham but we just wanted to make sure that a draw wasn't enough and that's what we've done."

In the night's other match, relegated Sunderland beat Fulham 2-1 thanks to goals from Anthony Le Tallec and Chris Brown.

Phone scandal in Italy

Football

REUTERS, Milan

The Italian Football Federation is investigating the content of tapped telephone conversations involving Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi talking of refereeing appointments for Serie A games.

The content of Moggi's telephone conversations during the 2004-05 season, intercepted by investigators in Turin, have been published in Italian newspapers and were passed on to the Federation who said they had already opened an investigation.

The probe by Turin public prosecutors was closed without action. Juventus won the title in the season concerned.

"I feel like millions of fans -- concerned, sad and angry," Federation president Franco Carraro told a news conference.

"Errors can be made but the important thing is that they are discovered, verified and that the necessary sanctions arrive."

Carraro said the Federation had received 272 pages of documentation from Turin prosecutors in March and added that the investigation would be swift and serious.

Moggi was dismissive of the affair.

"It's all a load of rubbish. Ask yourselves above all why they have done this on the eve of a title-win that we fully deserve?" he told website TG Com.

Juventus can claim their 29th Italian league title if they win against Palermo on Sunday and rivals AC Milan fail to win at Parma.

In the interceptions, Moggi talks about the selection of referees for specific games with Pierluigi Pairetto, who at the time was in charge of appointing match officials.

"I am very sorry to read things which could appear very different from the reality," Pairetto told the Italian news agency ANSA. "Maybe there were some comments which were inopportune but my good faith is beyond question."

Antonio Giraudo, Juve's managing director who also features in the taps, told a news conference in Turin that the club had not been informed of the investigation or of the content of the taps.

"I'd like to know why these intercepts were given first to newspapers and not to us or our lawyers. We found out about this through the newspapers and it is only today that we have received copies," he said.

"It is incredible that the fundamental rights of people can be of

so little concern," he added, noting the Turin investigation had stated in September that it had found no evidence of wrongdoing and had closed the case. "Once again Juventus and it's directors are under the spotlight of a media trial that is without precedent in the history of football," said Giraudo, who added he had no intention of resigning.

"We will come together, as we have done in previous years, and I am sure we will obtain even better results on the field," he said.

The taps, which have resulted in front page headlines in Italy's sports press, also include embarrassing references to former Juve coach Marcello Lippi, now in charge of the national team, exchanges with journalists and a number of discussions about transfer dealings.

Gianni Petrucci, president of Italy's National Olympic Committee, which oversees sport in the country, urged the Federation to make a swift investigation of the taps.

"The Federation need to accelerate their investigation in regard to the rights of everyone. Above all, who has erred needs to pay the price. It is clear that we want the image and the ethics (of the game) to be respected," he said.

SERIE A

Title beckons for Juve

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus could wrap up their 29th Serie A title in front of their own fans on Sunday if they win their final home match of the season against Palermo and closest rivals AC Milan fail to beat Parma.

Last Sunday Juve ended a run of five successive draws with a much-needed 3-0 win at Siena, which maintained their three-point lead over second-placed Milan, with two games left to play.

Milan's run of six victories in seven games has piled the pressure on Juventus, but their surge may have come just a little too late to overhaul the reigning champions.

The odds are against Milan catching Juve, but their Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko insists they will fight to the bitter end.

"We are having a good run of results and we will be fully focused on our last two matches," said the former European Footballer of the Year.

"We never give up. We need a favour from Palermo and let's hope

they can do something in Turin."

Palermo coach Giuseppe Papadopulo believes facing Juventus will bring out the best in his side.

"Up until now we have always performed well against the top teams, and I hope we can do the same on Sunday," he said.

"We know only too well that it's going to be difficult, but if we can find the same spirit that helped us beat Fiorentina last week, we can give Juve a hard time."

Papadopulo may be confident, but history suggests an upset is unlikely. The Sicilians' last league victory against Juve in Turin was way back in February 1962.

In attempt to ensure a full house at the Delle Alpi stadium, where Juve struggle to attract big crowds, ticket prices have been slashed to as low as five euros in some parts of the ground.

Juve's final match of the Serie A campaign is away to Reggina, while Milan host Roma.

If the pair finish level on points at the end of the season, Milan will be crowned champions courtesy of their better head-to-head record -- they won at the San Siro and drew at the Delle Alpi.

Doha ready for Asiad

AFP, Doha

The capital of the gas-rich state of Qatar is a work in progress, with massive construction underway everywhere you look.

It is all about being ready for its three weeks in the spotlight.

Doha is the host city of the 15th Asian Games, the biggest multi-sport event after the Summer Olympics, which is expected to attract a television audience of more than three billion people.

To many in Asia, Asiad is bigger than the Olympics and 45 countries from across the region will compete in 39 sports in December. For Qatar, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to show off its huge redevelopment that has come courtesy of the foreign investment flooding into a country that has the second largest gas reserves in the world.

Qatar won the rights to stage the Asian Games after a vote in 2000, becoming the first nation in the Gulf region and only the second in West Asia after Iran in 1974 to hold the prestigious event.

But as recently as March, rumours were circulating that the event would be transferred to another city because Doha would

not be ready.

"It is a giant workshop now but it will all be finished in time," insisted chief Games spokesman Wael Barghouti.

Qatar has invested 2.8 billion dollars into building new infrastructure including state-of-the-art sports facilities and an athletes village that will become a hospital once the event is over.

But the jewel in its crown is the huge, and completed, Aspire complex.

Built over 22 months with a minimum 2,100 workers on site at any one time, it is said to be the largest indoor sports dome in the world and will be the engine room of the Games.

The complex will host gymnastics, badminton, weightlifting, wrestling, boxing, wushu and kabaddi all under one roof.

Close by is the impressive Khalifa Stadium which will hold the opening and closing ceremonies and the blue riband athletics program.

Last month it announced that it will bid for the 2016 Olympics and it is working hard to attract events like the world indoor athletics championships and the world short court swimming champion-

ships.

While the Games this year will be noted as the biggest yet, it will also be remembered for the return to competition of Iraq, which has been suspended since Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Asif stars for Leicester

AFP, London

Leicestershire were indebted to their Asian stars away to Essex in the English County Championship on Thursday.

The city of Leicester boasts the largest Asian population in England and, unusually for a county side, they have an Indian international (Dinesh Mongia) and one from Pakistan (Mohammad Asif) in the same team.

Left-handed batsman Mongia top-scored with 165 in a Leicestershire innings of 417 which also featured a century from South African Hylton Ackerman.

Then paceman Asif took over, taking five for 56, as Essex were bowled out for 242 on their home Chelmsford ground.

FIXTURES

SUNDAY
(all 1300 GMT kick-off)
Ascoli v Lazio, Fiorentina v Reggina, Inter Milan v Siena, Juventus v Palermo, Lecce v Chievo, Livorno v Sampdoria, Messina v Empoli, Parma v AC Milan, Roma v Treviso, Udinese v Cagliari