



England midfielder Jermaine Jenas vies with Belarus' Aleksandr Yurevich during their friendly match at the Madejski Stadium in Reading, England on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Belarus beat England reserves



AFP, Reading, England

An upbeat Sven-Goran Eriksson put a positive spin on an embarrassing start to England's World Cup countdown after an experimental 'B' side went down to a 2-1 defeat at the hands of ten-man Belarus.

"It is always disappointing to lose a football game but it was not that important," Eriksson said after a match that was marred by an injury to Robert Green which has ruled the Norwich goalkeeper out of his squad for Germany.

"The important thing is to win against Paraguay (in England's opening World Cup match). It was much more positive than negative."

A late goal by substitute Sergei Kornilenko gave the former Soviet republic their win after Vitaly Kutuzov had cancelled out Jermaine Jenas's first-half header for an England line-up that had a core of established first-choice players.

The significance of the result was arguably outweighed by good

performances from man-of-the-match Aaron Lennon and Stewart Downing as well as a confident entry to the international stage from Arsenal teenager Theo Walcott.

Eriksson also took heart from the fact that Ashley Cole and Michael Owen had come safely through, respectively, 90-minute and one-hour workouts after injury-plagued seasons with their clubs.

Top of Eriksson's list of objectives for the evening had been to accelerate Owen's recovery of his cutting edge, the striker having just 29 minutes of competitive football for Newcastle this year.

Worryingly for England fans, that stat was soon showing its significance. Put into a fifth-minute one-on-one with Yuri Zhevnov, Owen was unable to find the kind of finish on which he has established his reputation, the goalkeeper comfortably blocking a shot that had neither guile nor venom.

Eriksson appeared confident however that Owen's edge would return with his fitness.

"The important thing was he played an hour, he seems very fit and he didn't feel anything after the game," the Swede stressed.

It was Michael Carrick's astute pass that put Owen in behind the Belarus defence for his early

chance but it was his Tottenham teammate Lennon who appeared most intent on catching the eye.

Twice inside the opening quarter of an hour, the uncapped winger generated scoring opportunities after leaving his marker, Aleksandr Yurevich, for dead.

"He showed why he is in the squad," Eriksson said, although he made it clear he is not seriously contemplating using Lennon as a starter in a berth reserved for David Beckham.

After the otherwise solid Peter Crouch had volleyed the best of several early chances over the bar, England took the lead in the 34th minute from a free-kick close to the left touchline.

Downing's whipped delivery was met by Owen with a header that rattled against the underside of the bar and Jenas, following up, nodded it past the goalkeeper.

Kutuzov, who had hit the post with a near post flick just before halftime, equalised in bizarre fashion five minutes after the restart.

As he ran up to take a goalkick, Green, who had replaced David James at the break, slipped and deposited the ball at the feet of Kutuzov, injuring his groin badly in the process.

Unmoved to Green's plight, the

Belarus forward sidefooted the ball into the opposite corner of the net.

The sight of the Norwich goalkeeper being stretched off had a subduing effect on both players and crowd but the tempo rose again with the introduction of Walcott half an hour from the end.

The 17-year-old showed why he is so highly-rated by gathering a clearance from the Belarus defence and testing the goalkeeper with a fierce half-volley from fully 30 yards.

"He's the youngest man in the squad and he showed he is ready," said Eriksson, who was happy to see vindication of the judgement that led him to promote Walcott from the Arsenal reserves to his World Cup squad.

"My only concern was that he could be nervous but he showed he can handle this situation."

Belarus were reduced to ten men for the final quarter of an hour after centre-back Sergei Omelyanchuk was sent off for two bookable fouls in quick succession on the livewire Lennon.

But the numerical disadvantage did not prevent Kornilenko from finding sufficient space in the box to win the match with a low shot across Green's replacement Scott Carson.

Morientes switches to Valencia

REUTERS, Madrid

Valencia said on Friday they had an agreement with Liverpool for the transfer of striker Fernando Morientes but they had not yet agreed terms with the player.

"At the moment we cannot say he has signed or that he is a Valencia player," sports director Amedeo Carboni was quoted as saying by the Europa Press news agency.

"I don't think there will be problems but we haven't reached an agreement with the player yet."

"We don't want to hide anything from anyone and will be the first to announce the news when it is finally closed."

Liverpool said on Thursday that Morientes had joined Valencia for an undisclosed fee.

The 30-year-old Spanish international struggled to find his feet at Liverpool after joining from Real Madrid in January 2005, scoring 12 goals in 61 games.

Valencia, who finished third in the Primera Liga in the season just ended, have made it clear they were looking for another striker to partner leading scorer David Villa for next season.

Carboni added that the club were also monitoring Feyenoord striker Salomon Kalou.

'Give Klinsmann a break'

AFP, Berlin

Brazilian legend Pele has told the critics to lay off Germany manager Jurgen Klinsmann, claiming he has done a fine job with the hosts ahead of next month's World Cup.

In his two-year reign Klinsmann, 41, has come under fire over team selections and his controversial decision to jet back and forth to his Californian home but Pele, a three-time World Cup winner with Brazil, has backed the former Bayern Munich striker.

"He is doing a good job," Pele told German television channel ZDF. "I have spoken with him a few times and chatted with (Franz) Beckenbauer (head of the World Cup organising committee) about Klinsmann."

"Some people don't like the fact that he has changed a lot. I think some people in Germany have a problem with the new developments over the past two years."

"But I think he is doing well. Klinsmann gives the team a lot of self-confidence."

Germany open the World Cup on June 9 in Munich against Costa Rica and face further group A matches against Ecuador and Poland.

Shevchenko keeps Chelsea waiting

AFP, London

English champions Chelsea must wait to see whether or not AC Milan striker Andriy Shevchenko will be moving to Stamford Bridge.

The 29-year-old has been offered a contract extension until 2011, and the Ukrainian star was scheduled for a meeting with AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani on Thursday.

However, the striker spent several hours at the Italian club's training facility for treatment on his injured knee, and emerged to tell reporters he had still to speak with club bosses.

Shevchenko said: "I cannot say anything yet - first I have to speak to Galliani."

"I will not meet Galliani today - perhaps tomorrow and maybe in the evening."

It would seem Stamford Bridge is the preferred destination of Shevchenko, who has been at the Italian club for seven years.

South Korea beat Bosnia

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea, strengthened by the return of their Europe-based players, beat Bosnia 2-0 in a World Cup warm-up match on Friday.

Seol Ki-hyeon opened the scoring for the home side in the 50th minute, heading in from close range after Bosnia keeper Romeo Mitrovic could only half-clear an effort by Ahn Jung-hwan.

Cho Jae-jin made certain of victory by blasting in a second from the edge of the area in the 90th minute.

South Korea coach Dick Advocaat had brought back his European players, including England-based duo Park Ji-sung and Lee Young-pyo, after his team had struggled at times to impose themselves in their last warm-up match against Senegal.

Bosnia looked dangerous on the break aided by the trickery on the left of Admir Vladavic, who forced a good save from South Korea keeper Lee Woon-jae in the 24th minute, but appeared to fall off the pace a little in the second half.

South Korea, who were held 1-1 by Senegal on Tuesday, now travel to Europe for final warm-up matches against Ghana and Norway.

Senderos ready to soar



AFP, Geneva

At the age of 21, Swiss international defender Philippe Senderos' commanding talent with Arsenal is conjuring up comparisons with his iconic English predecessor Tony Adams.

No mean feat for the Swiss centre-half, who has established himself as a consistent first team choice in the pivotal post at Highbury and as a linchpin for Switzerland's World Cup hopes in barely more than a season.

"He has the soul of a boss and has already asserted himself as the boss," said Switzerland under-21 coach Bernard Challandes.

After proving his worth with Switzerland's youth teams, Senderos' baptism of fire for the full-blooded "Nati" came in a World Cup qualifier against France just over a year ago.

He stifled French striker David Trezeguet to help secure a 0-0 draw against the strongest side in their qualifying group.

Injury permitting, he now bears the same pressure for Switzerland's opening match against 1998 World Cup winners in Stuttgart on June 13, where he will probably face his prolific Arsenal teammate Thierry Henry.

Senderos has gained maturity in leaps and bounds in the English Premier League following less than two seasons in senior football with his home club Servette Geneva.

"I am a big believer in this boy. He will be a major asset in the future," Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said.

"Philippe is completely focused and completely dedicated to the game. You have to consider that he is only 21. But he is not scared to play and wants the ball."

Sterling performances as captain of Switzerland's European under-17 championship winning side in 2002 helped Senderos attract an array of big name European suitors.

Although his father's Spanish origins helped draw Real Madrid and Barcelona, Senderos headed for the London club in 2003, a deal that was said to have been quietly sealed nearly a year beforehand.

He then spent the following year nursing injury and getting used to the tougher English game with Arsenal's reserves, only getting a toehold in the top flight in 2004-2005

thanks to an injury to England veteran Sol Campbell.

"It was a big, big step coming here and it took some time to adapt," Wengersaid.

Senderos was preferred to Campbell for the 2005 FA Cup final against Manchester United, which Arsenal won on penalties.

Alongside the rest of the Gunners' gaggle of fresh-faced defenders, Senderos is credited with learning swiftly from his mistakes.

Since then he has been largely favoured with his club boss.

Swiss-born youngster looks set to carry on being captain in a few countries.

Senderos' website is boldly headlined "One defender, one fighter, one talent".

But a link marked "genou" -- knee in French -- to medical sites, also hints at some understandable pre-World Cup nerves, after he was injured in a league match on April 23.

Senderos regained fitness but failed to win his place back for the Champions League final in Paris. Now he is concentrating on the



PHILIPPE SENDEROS

"He has quite an efficient technique with both feet and is very keen to learn always. He's good in the air and has a strong physique. He is suited to English football," Wenger said.

With at least four languages under his belt, a cool head and a yen to urge on his teammates, the

World Cup.

"I know what the coach wants from me. And I won't disappoint him," Senderos said in a tribute to Switzerland's coach Kobi Kuhn.

'Support Eng? No way'

AFP, Glasgow

Scotland boss Walter Smith reignited old rivalries with their neighbours on Thursday by admitting that he will not be supporting England at the World Cup.

Scotland First Minister Jack McConnell sparked a furious row when he admitted he would not be backing Sven-Goran Eriksson's men in Germany next month.

The Scots failed to qualify for the June 9-July 9 tournament.

"Whatever team you support is a personal decision, isn't it? Nobody can criticise anybody for that," said Smith.

"I don't think anyone who is Scottish can turn around and say that they are supporters of England."

"Most people in Scotland support Scotland so I don't see the problem in saying you don't fancy England to win the World Cup."

"I think they are one of the teams who can win the World Cup but that doesn't stop me from being a Scotland supporter."

McConnell sparked a row on Wednesday when he said he would not be backing England.

"There are people who think that as First Minister I should automatically support England instead - but football is not about politics, so I'll not be," he told a Scottish radio station.

"I will be supporting other teams in the various games that I manage to watch."

Questioned on which these might be, McConnell said: "There are many teams in the World Cup who have got Scottish-based players appearing for them - Trinidad, Angola, other teams too. So I'll be watching their games with interest."

When Smith replaced Berti Vogts as Scotland manager, it was too late to salvage their World Cup qualifying campaign.

But he is already looking ahead to the European Championships and he will be taking in a number of games in Germany in a bid to compile a dossier on some of their opponents in the coming qualifiers.

Pressure on men in black



REUTERS, Berlin

If the best referees are those who are barely noticed until they blow their final whistle, the men in the middle of the action at next month's World Cup finals are hoping to be virtually invisible.

Pressure on the "men in black" has never been greater than at this year's tournament as have expectations that the refs will not only be fair -- to the best of their ability -- but also accurate beyond the shadow of a TV replay.

FIFA issued warnings to its elite pack of whistle-blowers that they will be summarily punished for gross errors in Germany by not being picked for any further World Cup matches.

The world governing body has also made clear "only human" is an excuse it does not want to hear after blunders in 2002 left a bad taste -- especially in Italian and Spanish mouths.

Weighing further on their minds are several referee scandals, such as last year in domestic leagues in Germany and Brazil. More recently, there have been investigations into officiating in Italy and match-fixing in the Netherlands.

On top of it all, outright blunders and questionable calls in big matches by some of the world's best refs, including in the semi-finals and final of the Champions League, kept an unwanted spotlight on match officiating.

"If you make a big mistake in your first game, it will be your last game, and that's something that has been made very clear to us," said Graham Poll, England's World Cup referee.

"The message is very, very clear," he told the BBC. "They (FIFA) will be very supportive...but there is a very, very high standard expected."

FIFA vowed to make improvements after 2002, when both Spain and Italy were knocked out after controversial referee calls.

But the lingering question is: can the referee and his two assistants really keep tabs on 22 highly-tuned athletes, many of whom would not hesitate to deceive if it would help their

team?

Norwegian referee Terje Hauge admitted he erred by blowing for a foul too early when Arsenal keeper Jens Lehmann took out Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o in the Champions League final, denying Barcelona the goal that followed. Lehmann was sent off and later said the game is now too fast for referees.

Steps to improve referee performance include doubling their salaries to \$40,000 from the last World Cup and cutting the number of referees to 22 from 36 -- to give those on hand more time in action and, theoretically, help them stay sharp.

Tough fitness requirements were enforced and those who fell short on sprint and endurance were unceremoniously dumped.

All were also required, for the first time, to demonstrate proficiency in English -- both written and spoken.

Another first: refereeing trios will be from the same country or at same confederation this year.

"The referee teams have all been together for months or even years," said Hellmut Krug, head of referees at the German football association (DFB), who welcomed the 22 referees and their assistants to a training camp near Frankfurt on Thursday.

"That should guarantee they are on the same wavelength," he added of the men FIFA president Sepp Blatter called the World Cup's "33rd team". "They understand each other without words."

In the event words are needed, the referees will now have head-set radio devices to communicate -- also a first.

Germany had hoped that a match-rigging scandal that hit in 2005 around former referee Robert Hoyzer would be laid to rest by now but the spectre of corruption is haunting the tournament.

FIFA originally picked 23 teams of referees. But Italian Massimo De Santis and his assistants were removed in the wake of the investigation in Italy into match-rigging.

"Everyone's innocent until proven otherwise, but it's still hard to swallow," said Markus Merk, a German referee and one of the few known faces left since prolific colleagues such as Italy's Pierluigi Collina and Sweden's Anders Frisk retired.

Even an official of his standing

knows the pitfalls after he was criticised for a controversial disallowed goal in AC Milan's Champions League semi-final exit. He will be hoping to remain as anonymous as possible next month.

Lippi's son under investigation

AFP, Rome

Davide Lippi, son of Italy coach Marcello Lippi, was placed under judicial investigation in a new twist to the country's football scandal on Friday though the head of the Italian delegation said this would not affect World Cup morale.

Davide Lippi and three other members of GEA, Italy's biggest firm of football agents -- Giuseppe De Mita, Riccardo Calleri and Tommaso Cellini -- face charges of using threats and violence in their dealings in the transfer market.

Magistrates are making inquiries to see if they threatened players with hampering their career if they did not sign on with the company.

This latest development in the affair comes as Lippi senior is preparing the national team for the finals which begin on June 9 in Germany. The Azzurri are pitted in Group E with Ghana, the United States and the Czech Republic.

Italian team chief Giancarlo Abete, quoted by the ANSA agency, said: "Marcello Lippi has sufficient strength of personality to overcome this unpleasant news. As for the national team, the news will have no impact."

The company in the eye of the storm, GEA, is run by Alessandro Moggi, the son of Luciano Moggi, the general director of Juventus.

Green World Cup



REUTERS, Berlin

Germany aims to host the most environmentally friendly World Cup ever thanks to a programme called "Green Goal" designed to make the soccer showpiece as climate neutral as possible.

Both the Germany and Brazil squad will use trains, as well as planes, to travel around the country, solar panels will adorn stadium roofs, rain water is being harvested and beverages will be sold in reusable cups.

But far from being some sort of utopia for tree-lovers, the measures are a reflection of attitudes in a country with a history of tackling green issues.

"The World Cup is a great chance to put a focus on the environment around the world and will hopefully raise awareness everywhere," Klaus Toepfer, the "Green Goal" ambassador for the tournament, said in an interview with Reuters.

"Our aim is to offset the total CO2 emissions caused by the World Cup in Germany also through promoting public transport during the event," said Toepfer,

until last month the executive director of the United Nations Environmental Programme.

"We also know big sport events create an avalanche of waste. We explored: How to reduce that? How to recycle? Awareness is rising. This is the first time for a football World Cup after we had quite successful endeavours at the Olympics since Sydney."

The "Green Goal" was launched last year with the aim of offsetting the estimated 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide generated within Germany by transportation, construction of the stadiums and the presence of an expected 3.2 million spectators.

All ticket holders, for instance, can ride public transport for free on match days, thousands of accredited journalists will receive free month-long rail passes for the country's train network and stadium drinks will be sold in reusable "Cups of the Cup".

"It's wonderful to send the signal you can get to the match much better without your car," said Toepfer, a driving force behind the "Green Goal."

"The greening of the World Cup is not a little project on the margins, but at the heart of a lot of interest around the world," said Toepfer.



South Korea's Park Ji-Sung (R) tries to go past Bosnia-Herzegovina's Branimir Bajic during a friendly match at the Seoul World Cup Stadium in Seoul on Friday. PHOTO: AFP