



England striker Wayne Rooney (R) walks along with coach Sven-Goran Eriksson (L) at a training session in Cologne on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Inzaghi set for Czech tie?

INTERNET, undated

Italy striker Pippo Inzaghi is a serious contender to start against the Czech Republic on Thursday, reports are suggesting.

The Milan striker was a late addition to the Azzurri squad after his sensational 2006 at club level, but has yet to appear on German soil.

Nevertheless, it is understood that boss Marcello Lippi is pondering including him in his next starting XI.

Italy need to avoid defeat to secure qualification, while a victory would see the Azzurri top their group and miss out on Brazil in the second round.

And with star striker Luca Toni struggling to perform, Lippi may opt to give his former Juventus disciple a chance to shine.

Inzaghi reminded everyone of his presence in a training game on Monday when he netted six goals.

He could now start in a 4-3-1-2 alongside club colleague Alberto Gilardino and be supported by Francesco Totti.

Inzaghi would certainly seem to be a popular choice for fans back home in the Italian peninsula. Internet polls on various sites, such as the Gazzetta dello Sport's interactive platform, have him ranked as the player most would like to see brought into the side.

Lippi admitted on Sunday that he perhaps should have brought SuperPippo on while they struggled to break down nine-man America.

Inzaghi has also won the backing of Paolo Rossi. "Pippo only needs 40 minutes to make an impression, he's always there when needed," said the Spain '82 topscorer.

Africans seek

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mates viewed their last World Cup as a chance to secure suitors from big-name clubs, Yapi Yapo answered: "Yes -- the World Cup is a chance to show our capacities. This is secondary to team and country but I am not saying that this is not in our heads."

Yapi Yapo spent part of last season on loan to Swiss club Young Boys from FC Nantes of France.

Michel said he would give players a chance who had not yet taken the field.

Michel will be without captain Didier Drogba who gained a second yellow card in the match against the Netherlands.

"He is not at his full capacity either physically or psychologically. It is clear he is very disappointed," Michel said, but he added his captain would not leave Germany early.

The coach refused to dismiss Serbia despite the team's 6-0 thrashing by Argentina on Friday, adding he was surprised at the extent of their defeat.

"There is a bad atmosphere in their team and that shows on the pitch... for pride's sake they will be seeking a win."

Swansong of Hey

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"The Ivorians are a strong team," Milosevic said. "But, all 30 other teams at the World Cup are tough enough for us considering the state we are in."

With leading scorer Mateja Kezman out because of a red card, midfielder Ognjen Koroman with a pair of yellows, and defenders Nemanja Vidic and Ivica Dragutinovic out with injuries, Serbia-Montenegro "has nothing to gain" in its final soccer appearance, Milosevic said.

"The motive," he said, "was killed after the Argentina game."

Rooney's fear factor



INTERNET, undated

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has revealed that he publicly announced the return of Wayne Rooney to his starting eleven in the hope it would unnerve his compatriots, Sweden, ahead of their Group B meeting today.

Eriksson broke with his own custom to declare that Rooney would start in place of Peter Crouch in Cologne.

He said of the Rooney 'Fear Factor': "The opponents don't want to hear that Rooney is starting. He's on fire in training, tackling all over."

"His desire to do well in the World Cup is enormous. It's important for England he plays - for the squad and fans."

Manchester United's prized 20-year-old comes in for Crouch as the Liverpool striker is only one booking away from a ban.

But Eriksson also believes Rooney's return will give England and their fans a huge psychological boost.

"The fans want to see Wayne Rooney playing," he said.

"Tottenham, Chelsea and Everton fans want to see Wayne Rooney playing. Even Manchester City fans want to see Wayne Rooney playing for England."

Rooney has made a remarkably swift recovery from a broken foot, but Eriksson admitted: "When you talk about Wayne Rooney, nothing surprises me."

"Even at the end of our training session when we are taking free-kicks, he wants to stay in goal - although he wasn't allowed to."

But Eriksson warned: "I don't think we should expect too much against Sweden. Don't expect him to be the 100% Wayne Rooney and resolve everything by himself."

"I expect him to get better and what he needs is matches. The touches, the combinations and the timing are what you lose when you don't play football."

Another beneficiary of Rooney's return could be Michael Owen, himself a returnee from a broken foot, who has been substituted in both England's first two games and is trying to get back on the scoresheet after two blanks.

"I expect Owen and Rooney to play like they used to, in the golden days," added Eriksson.

"They always play well together. I suppose it will be easier for Michael against Sweden."

"His partner is Rooney so he can stay up front more and Wayne can be the linking player between him and the midfield."

"All strikers need goals, the confidence of a striker when they score is right up there and it's the opposite when they don't."

Meanwhile, in defence, Rio Ferdinand earns his 50th England cap today, and Eriksson says the United centre-back "woke up" and is now back to his best after being dropped from the team for the World Cup qualifier against Austria at Old Trafford in September.

Eriksson said: "He has everything a central defender needs, one of the most elegant you can find. When I put him on the bench I think he deserved it at that time, but he never complained."

"He wasn't playing very well and when he doesn't play very well you ask 'is he injured?' Or, 'is he not concentrating?' Because if he is not injured and he is concentrating, he is one of the best."

"Now he is playing very well again, he has got one yellow card in an England shirt and he is coming up to 50 caps, which is just incredible and shows you his quality."

Podolski's no fool

INTERNET, undated

Germany striker Lukas Podolski is set to take legal action against a radio station who he believes is making him look like an idiot.

Now, it is no secret that finding a footballer of above average intelligence is as about as rare as a France goal in the World Cup finals (i.e. one comes along about every eight years), but Podolski is taking exception to a Cologne radio station's portrayal of him in a spoof diary slot on ARD.

"I have a sense of humour but these jokes are below the belt," he said. "I'm entitled to seek justice."

According to German Football Association (DFB) spokesman Harald Stenger, Podolski has the full backing of the federation.

"Comedy is all well and good but this is attacking his dignity," Stenger said. "ARD will get no more interviews with Podolski until this is sorted out."

Kiev erupts in joy

AFP, Kiev

Central Kiev erupted in an explosion of fireworks, cheers and car horns late Monday after Ukraine avenged its humiliating World Cup debut with a convincing 4-0 win over Saudi Arabia.

"This is better than sex!" one young woman shrieked, to the apparent chagrin of her boyfriend, as fireworks exploded over Kiev's Independence Square as the game wound up.

Ukraine, who suffered a shock 4-0 trouncing at the hands of Spain in their opening match last week, had to win Monday's contest to have a chance of advancing from their Group H to the next round.

The several thousand people gathered in the capital's central square despite drizzling rain to watch the match erupted in a virtual roar of cheers at the end of the match.

"Ukraine! Ukraine!" chanted the crowd, waving Ukrainian flags, decked out in the yellow and blue of the standard, hugging and dancing.

"We're the best, don't you see," yelled Helen, a university student.

Passing cars joined in the party, honking their horns. One ambulance driver flashed a victory sign as he sped by.

Fans watched the crucial match on screens set up in several cities throughout the ex-Soviet nation. In the eastern city of Dnipropetrovsk, some 3,000 fans watched the game and traffic was blocked in the central square.

Screens were also set up in Lviv in the west, Odessa in the south and Kharkiv in the east.

The country's bickering politicians, struggling to form a governing coalition three months after a parliamentary election, were quick to jump on the bandwagon.

"It's a knock-you-off-your-feet result," Roman Bezsmertnyi, a top official in President Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc said.

"Today politicians can learn from footballers on how to work toward such a result," Interfax quoted him as saying.

"Finally football has united the country," Pyotr Poroshenko, another Our Ukraine official, said.

Iran want

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Iran play Angola on June 21 and are not in for an easy game. Angola held Mexico to a 0-0 draw after losing 1-0 to Portugal and still stand a chance to qualify for the next round.

Iran's elimination helps politicians and diplomats in Iran and Europe save face after talk that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, under fire from the West in a nuclear dispute and following controversial comments, was to have watched the side play in Germany if they had made it through to the second round.

Michel will leave

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His other World Cup trips have been with African sides. In 1994, he led Cameroon at the finals in the United States and four years later he was Morocco coach at France '98.

Michel should have been Tunisia's coach at the 2002 finals in Japan but he departed just months before the tournament.

Borgetti misses

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Portugal would also guarantee its fourth straight second-round appearance with a draw.

If Portugal wins, Mexico would still advance if Iran wins or draws against Angola. But if the Black Antelopes upset the Asian team for their first World Cup victory, they would move into a second-place tie with Mexico.

The first tiebreaker is goal differential, where Mexico now holds a three-goal advantage.

Marco helps heal divisions



REUTERS, Titisee

Coach Marco van Basten has got the Dutch players pulling together for once and been rewarded with a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

Van Basten took charge in 2004 and has ditched big names like Patrick Kluijvert and Clarence Seedorf. His young squad has so far managed to avoid the internal squabbles that have marred so many Dutch campaigns in the past.

"He (Van Basten) knows exactly what is going on and what we need," says Van der Vaart, Netherlands central midfielder.

The Dutch have beaten Serbia & Montenegro 1-0 and the Ivory Coast 2-1, qualifying for the second round before Wednesday's final Group C match against Argentina.

Van Basten, one of the great players of his generation, is pleased with the progress so far, but sees room for improvement.

"Against Ivory Coast we did not play well in the second half but the team showed spirit and kept fighting and that makes me proud to see a real team," he told reporters.

"But it is not only the spirit that is important, we also want to dominate and control matches completely and during the first two matches that still was not satisfying."

"We are trying to improve that not only in the training sessions but also by showing and discussing videos."

The Dutch, beaten World Cup finalists in 1974 and 1978, have an unhappy history of disputes at major tournaments.

Van Basten experienced this first hand in 1990 when the then European champions failed to blend as a group and went out in the second round to eventual winners West Germany.

The Dutch reached the World Cup final in Germany in 1974 but lost to the hosts.

Their preparations were disrupted after a German newspaper published colourful reports about a party at their hotel, leaving the players with plenty of explaining to do to their wives and girlfriends.

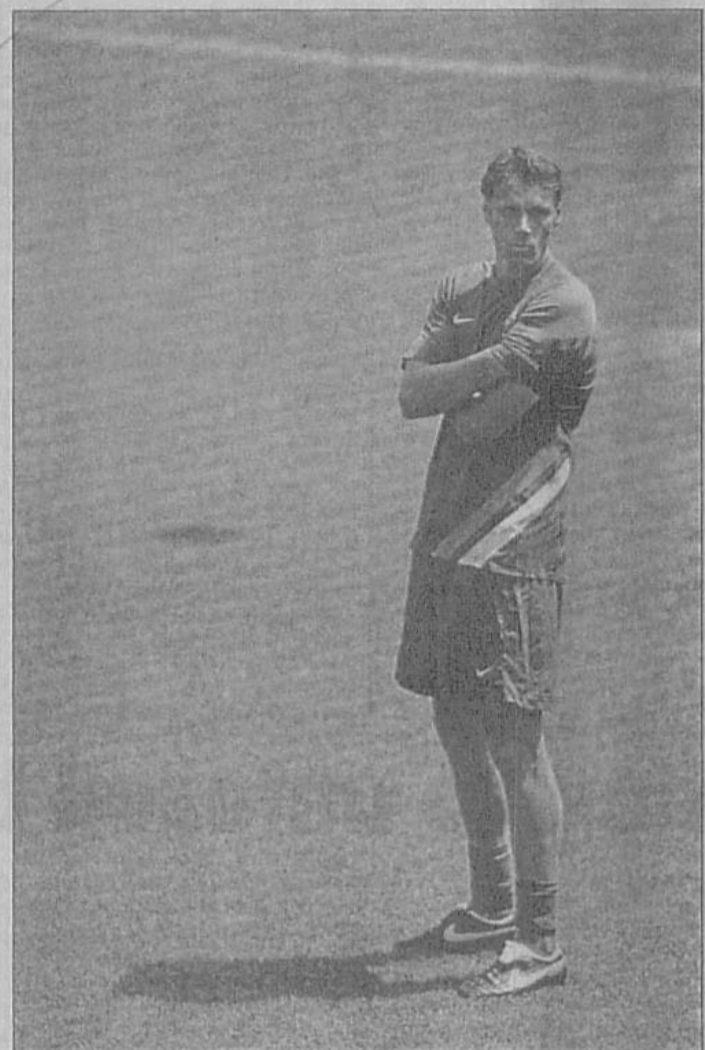
Four years later Johan Cruyff, the central figure in the 1974 team, and midfielder Wim van Hanegem pulled out of the World Cup squad. A weakened team made it to the final only to lose to hosts Argentina.

Playmaker Rafael van der Vaart,

who played his first major tournament at Euro 2004 in Portugal, says everything has changed in the Dutch camp.

"The team spirit has really improved a lot and now it is very special to be part of this team," Van der Vaart told reporters.

"Van Basten is also a younger coach than his predecessors and is close to the squad. He knows exactly what is going on and what we need."



VAN BASTEN

Bad omens for Italy



AFP, Duisburg

Some of Italy's legendary stars, keeping a watchful eye on the national team at the 2006 World Cup, might be forgiven for feeling that they are looking at a mirror image of Italian footballing history.

Thirty-six years ago in Mexico, Alessandro "Sandro" Mazzola and Gianni "Gigi" Riva tussled for a place on the pitch in a similar manner to playmakers Francesco Totti and Alessandro Del Piero today.

Mazzola and Riva's rivalry in the 1960s as players for Milan's two clubs, Inter and AC Milan respectively, spilled over into the national side.

Italy's coaches could not figure out how to field the two brilliant midfielders in the same team.

"They ended up playing in a relay, the 'staffetta', in each match during the 1970 World Cup, when Italy eventually lost 4-1 to Brazil in a final that is often hailed as the best ever."

Today, Roma's Totti and Juventus's Del Piero have both

appeared on the field in Germany in each of Italy's matches, but never simultaneously. And the Azzurri may face Brazil as soon as the next round.

Now in their sixties, the grey and white-haired veterans' demeanour mirrors their contrasting styles on the field decades ago.

The dapper, bespectacled Riva is the general manager of the Squadra Azzurra, while Mazzola, who sports a light blue 'Scotland' cap and casual shirt, is a television pundit.

"I went to see a match with Scotland and I liked the cap. That was about three years ago," the cigar-chomping 64-year-old explained.

On the sidelines of training at the Italian base in Duisburg Monday, Mazzola dismissed suggestions that the much-criticised squad should start over again following their incident-packed 1-1 draw with the United States.

"It went badly in the second game, they didn't play well. But the group that has been formed over the last two years plays good football," said Mazzola.

"Let's say it was a passing incident. I think they'll already start to play well again against the Czech Republic," he added.

Nearby, Riva paced around the field, his progress constantly interrupted by radio and TV reporters seeking the opinions of the former "Golden Boy" of Italian football on his embattled squad.

"Brazil are always the strongest of all, because they just have to enjoy listening to those who say they're the best, while the other teams who hope to be first say that it depends on the Brazilians," Riva, 63, commented amiably.

When Totti admitted a few weeks ago to being 70 percent fit following a broken ankle he suffered in February, the older Del Piero responded that he was 100 percent fit.

"I don't think there's any team in the World Cup, except maybe Brazil, that plays two pointmen with two playmakers. There is Brazil, but that's another matter, another world," Mazzola observed.

"It's very difficult to do so, you need a lot of training session and there's no time here."

Both veterans insisted the atmosphere at the Italian camp was peaceful -- "sereno".

"The atmosphere is serene -- at least, while they draw instead of win. But that's football," Mazzola smiled.

Pain of being substituted



AFP, Berlin

French football icon Zinedine Zidane's dream when he came out of international retirement last year was to lead France to a second World Cup title.

Now he risks being remembered for the humiliation he felt in being substituted in what could be his final match for Les Bleus.

The double goalscoring hero from the 1998 final will celebrate his 34th birthday on the sidelines when France try to rescue their hopes against Togo on Friday, after picking up his second booking in the 1-1 draw with South Korea.

Whether he will be sitting near to coach Raymond Domenech is another matter given his reaction when he was surprisingly replaced in the 91st minute by David Trezeguet, who was also handed the captain's armband.

The former Juventus and Real Madrid 'galactico' strode behind Domenech and then uncharacteristically flung his sweatband towards the dugout.

Typically he made no reference to it afterwards preferring to keep his own counsel, but he is not the first high profile player to suffer such a humiliation.

English darling Gary Lineker had already said that the Euro '92 finals would be his final farewell after outstanding performances at the 1986 and 1990 World Cups - scoring 10 goals in total - but even he wasn't immune from suffering the cruelest of blows.

Then 32, Lineker like the rest of the England team had failed to score in their opening two matches (0-0 draws with Denmark and France) but to everyone's amazement coach Graham Taylor removed him with half-an-hour remaining and with the final group match against Sweden delicately balanced at 1-1.

Lineker, who was just one goal away from equalling Bobby Charlton's record of 49 international goals, looked astonished.

The team's morale dropped and they went out losing 2-1 to the Swedes.

"Graham Taylor terminated this deadliest of striker's superb England career with rude and humiliating abruptness," complained one reporter.

Taylor's career at the England helm came to an end soon after. He was axed when he failed to get England to the 1994 World Cup finals.

"It was nothing personal," said Taylor in reference to the Lineker episode.

"If it had been, I would have left him on so he could have suffered like everyone else."

Luis Figo can sympathise with

Zidane and Lineker. As Portuguese captain, he was replaced during the Euro 2004 quarter-final against England and stamped off ignoring coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

"I have nothing to prove, the people know me well," said Figo who bounced back when he was named man of the match in the semi-final victory over The Netherlands.

Sometimes, a big name substitution pays dividends as Egypt's golden boy Mido discovered at the African Nations Cup earlier this year.

The Spurs striker was out of sorts in the semi-final clash with Senegal and eventually coach Hassan Shehata had had enough.

Mido was furious at being taken off.

The 22-year-old and Shehata had to be separated as they ranted and raved at one another.

"Why are you taking me off?" asked a furious Mido.

"Because I am the coach," replied Shehata.

"You are nothing but a donkey!" stormed Mido.

"No, it is you who is the donkey," replied Shehata.

Portugal take

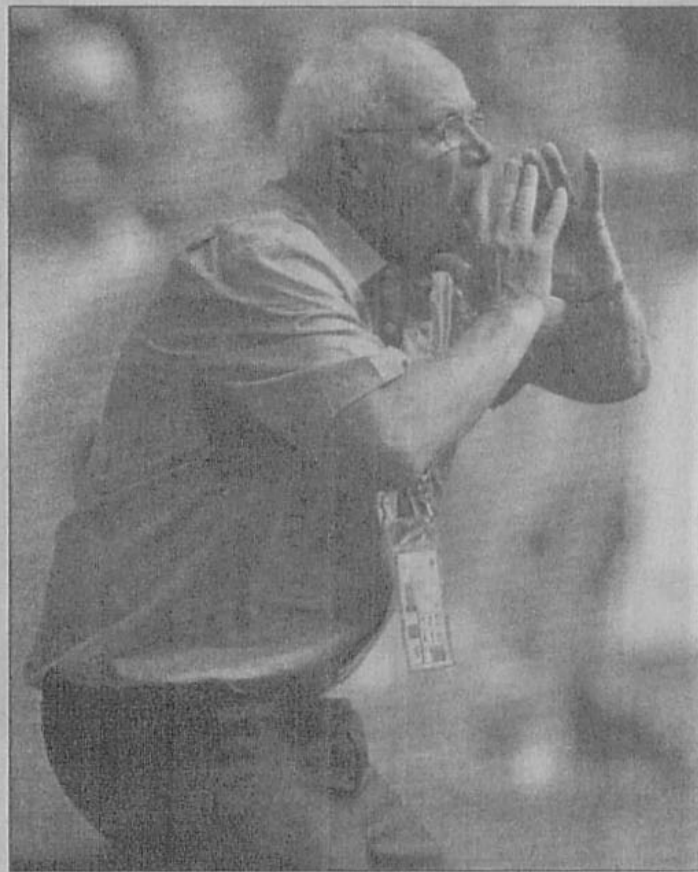
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each game one at a time. We won the first game, now we've qualified and following on from Euro 2004 we are just having to concentrate on one game at a time," Deco said.

"All the teams are balanced, I don't think any are above average but they're all playing at the same level."

Scolari joined Portugal after taking Brazil to the 2002 world title and has become their most successful coach, chalking up a record 29 victories and leading them to the Euro 2004 final.

They are now unbeaten in 16 competitive matches stretching back to February 2005.



Togolese coach Otto Pfister shouts at his charges during their match against Switzerland in Dortmund on Monday. PHOTO: AFP