

Eriksson revels in excellent record

REUTERS, Baden-Baden

England may toil against South American teams but they will go into Sunday's World Cup second round match with Ecuador knowing they have nearly always won such games under Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Though England's quarterfinal exit to Brazil at the 2002 World Cup had keeper David Seaman in tears, they have won their six other matches against South Americans since Eriksson took effective charge in February 2001.

It has very rarely been easy, with England often struggling to keep possession against sides who are confident on the ball and give little away at the back.

Only two weeks ago, England needed an own goal by Paraguay captain Carlos Gamarra to make a 1-0 winning start to their Group B campaign in Germany.

In their dummy-run for that game, England had snatched a 2-1 victory over Uruguay in March after trailing 1-0 until 15 minutes from the end. Winger Joe Cole only grabbed the winner in the third minute of stoppage time.

Eriksson's men also left it late last November when they were outplayed for long periods by old foes Argentina in a friendly in Geneva. Trailing 2-1 with three minutes to go, Michael Owen

scored twice to snaffle an unlikely victory.

Last year's U.S. tour yielded a less than emphatic 3-2 win over Colombia in which Owen, now back in England with a ruptured cruciate ligament, scored a hat-trick.

If defeat by Brazil marked the low point of England's 2002 World Cup, their highlight was a 1-0 group stage win over Argentina, courtesy of a penalty converted by captain David Beckham beneath the Sapporo Dome.

Eriksson, whose preparations for Japan brought a morale-boosting 4-0 win over Paraguay, expects a tough game on Sunday from a well-organised side.

But he told reporters: "I think and strongly believe we will go through."

The Swede is reportedly considering a marked tactical switch for the match in Stuttgart, bringing in Michael Carrick as a holding midfielder and dropping forward Peter Crouch to the bench.

The move would leave Wayne Rooney as a lone striker, backed by a five-man midfield in which Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard would provide attacking support.

Owen Hargreaves was tipped by the British media on Saturday to replace Jamie Carragher as stand-in at right back for the injured Gary Neville.

Ecuador hope to lift national gloom

AFP, Stuttgart

At home, Ecuador plays its football at altitude. In Germany, they're on a high having reached the World Cup second round for the first time and given a huge morale boost to their country.

Ecuador has often been South America's poor relation, when it comes to football but will be in the spotlight on Sunday when they face England for a place in the quarterfinals.

Brazil and Argentina are the undisputed continental kings and Ecuador, according to the much-maligned FIFA rankings, are only the sixth best side on the continent behind Colombia, Uruguay and Paraguay.

"We have written history," said the team's Colombian coach Luis Suarez who insists Ecuador are now the third force in South America.

"We've achieved our first target. Now we need to do more. What we have done is good for the country. The big South American football nations are Brazil and Argentina but now Ecuador has the chance to join them."

At home, however, there is less confidence.

The country, where the average

gross domestic product is just 4,300 dollars, is enduring severe financial problems despite its position as the world's largest exporter of bananas.

"In the name of our country, we are united and proud and we are determined to follow your example," said President Alfredo Palacio who earlier this year was forced to introduce a state of emergency to quell protests against a US-Ecuador free-trade pact.

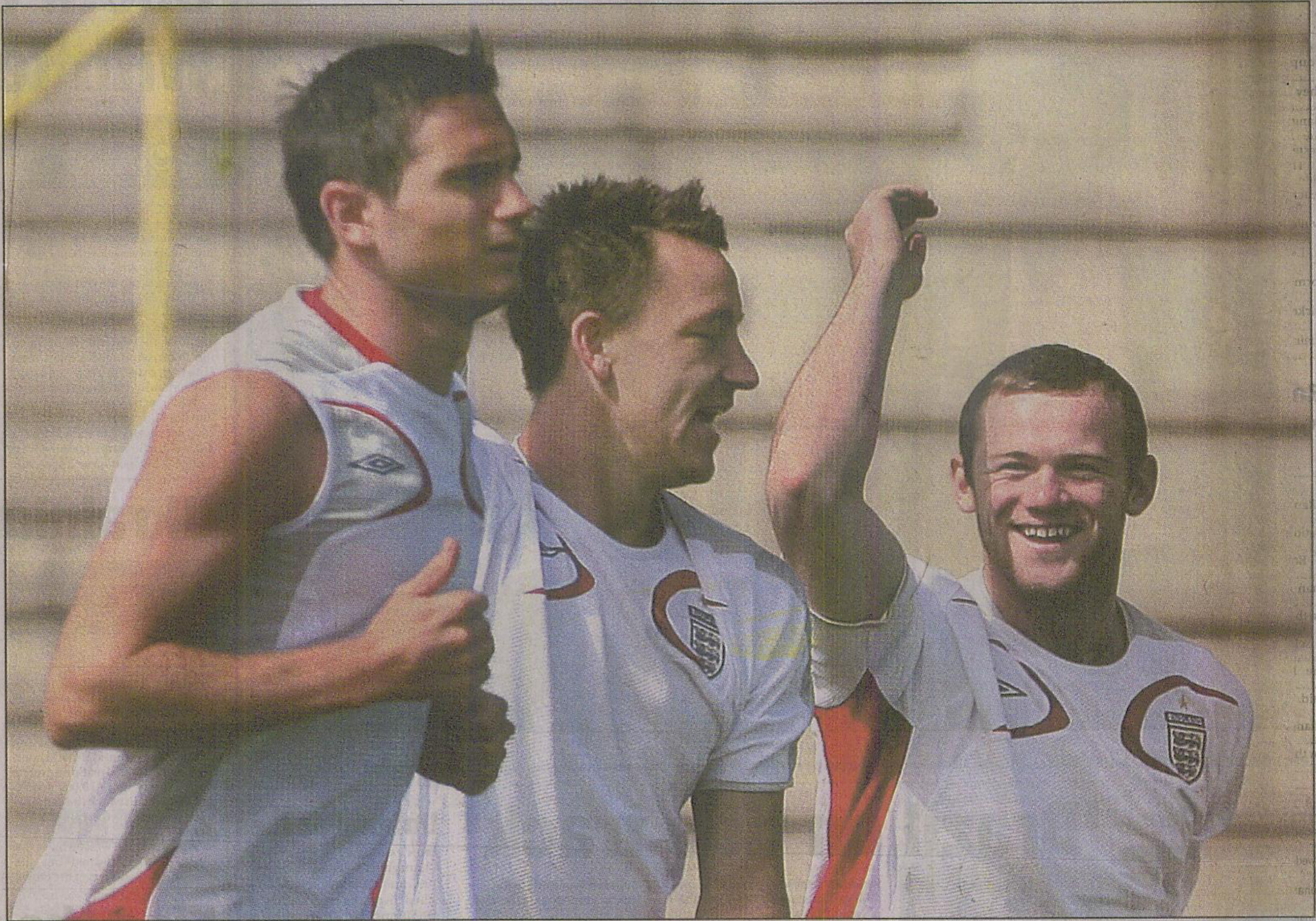
"It's a enormous effort which unites us all."

Newspapers have gushed over the team's German campaign, which has deflected attention from the troubled country, which has seen seven presidents in power since 1996.

There is also ongoing tension on the frontier with Colombia while a four-year border war was fought with Peru in the 1990s.

The CIA describes Ecuador as a transit country for cocaine originating in Colombia and Peru as well as an "attractive location for cash-placement by drug traffickers laundering money because of dollarization and a weak anti-money-laundering regime".

A pair of brothers, Juan Alfredo and Roberto Wright, introduced



SEEMS RELAXED: England forward Wayne Rooney (R) shares a light moment with John Terry (C) and Frank Lampard as they warm up for training at Mittelbergstadion on Friday.

Crouch ready to click ENGLAND V ECUADOR 'World Cup starts here'

AFP, Buhlertal

Beanpole striker Peter Crouch insisted on Thursday he can click with Wayne Rooney and develop a deadly partnership in the absence of Michael Owen.

Owen ruptured his anterior cruciate knee ligament in the first minute of England's 2-2 draw with Sweden on Tuesday and is out of the tournament.

Whether coach Sven-Goran Eriksson opts to start with 25-year-old Crouch up front alongside Rooney against Ecuador on Sunday or uses Steven Gerrard as a second striker remains to be seen, but the Liverpool front man said he can do the job.

"Obviously with Michael going there is a void to be filled and I hope I can fill it. I think myself and Wayne can compliment each other and it

can work," he said at England's training base in southern Germany.

"There is one less striker but I have always had confidence in my ability that if I get the chance I'll do well and hopefully there's more chances for me to keep proving myself."

Crouch has scored six times in his last six appearances for his country, including the crucial first goal in the 2-0 Group B win against Trinidad and Tobago.

Some commentators think he performs better when he comes off the bench, but Crouch, who numbers six clubs already in his career, insisted he can be equally effective over 90 minutes.

"Obviously, I want to play," he said. "I can make an impact off the bench but I can make an impact for the full 90 minutes as well. I've scored six in six now and hopefully I can keep that going."

Crouch has proved an asset because of his height, and England have been playing a long ball game to take advantage of that, with some commentators saying it is because he can't play when the ball comes to his feet.

The Liverpool star said such criticism was a pet hate of his.

"It frustrates me when people say that, it really does," he said.

team prepares to face Ecuador for a place in the quarter-finals here Sunday.

David Beckham is determined to banish the memory of England's timid 2002 World Cup exit as his

team prepares to face Ecuador for a place in the quarter-finals here Sunday.

Beckham believes England may never have a better chance of winning the World Cup than this year, and is desperate to atone for what he sees as a missed opportunity four years ago in Japan.

England were beaten 2-1 in the quarter-finals by eventual winners Brazil despite taking a 1-0 lead and seeing the South Americans reduced to 10 men early in the second half.

The nature of England's surrender on that sizzling hot day in Shizuoka has stayed with Beckham ever since -- but he firmly believes that the 2006 finals offer a chance for redemption.

"I was gutted after we got beat by Brazil in Japan because I did think that when we'd gone 1-0 up

we'd put ourselves in a good position to go on and win it from there," he said.

"But it wasn't meant to be. Now this time is the best chance I feel we've had for many years."

While England struggled in the heat of Japan four years ago and had key players either missing or

lacking full fitness, Beckham believes there can be no excuse for another failure.

Even allowing for the tournament-ending injury to striker Michael Owen and the lack of match sharpness of Wayne Rooney, he thinks England are still strong enough to end a 40-year wait for a second World Cup victory.

"There's no excuses this time," Beckham said. "In the past we've gone out of competitions at stages when we should have gone further. It's up to us now -- we're the ones who can progress as a team."

"We can talk about the positive stuff, and the fans and everything but what we do on the pitch is the major thing now."

Beckham will win his 93rd cap on Sunday and though he has expressed his desire to continue his career beyond the World Cup, he realises that at 31, this is probably his last chance to win the greatest prize in football.

"I think all the players in the squad who've been around for a while and played in World Cups

KEY QUOTES

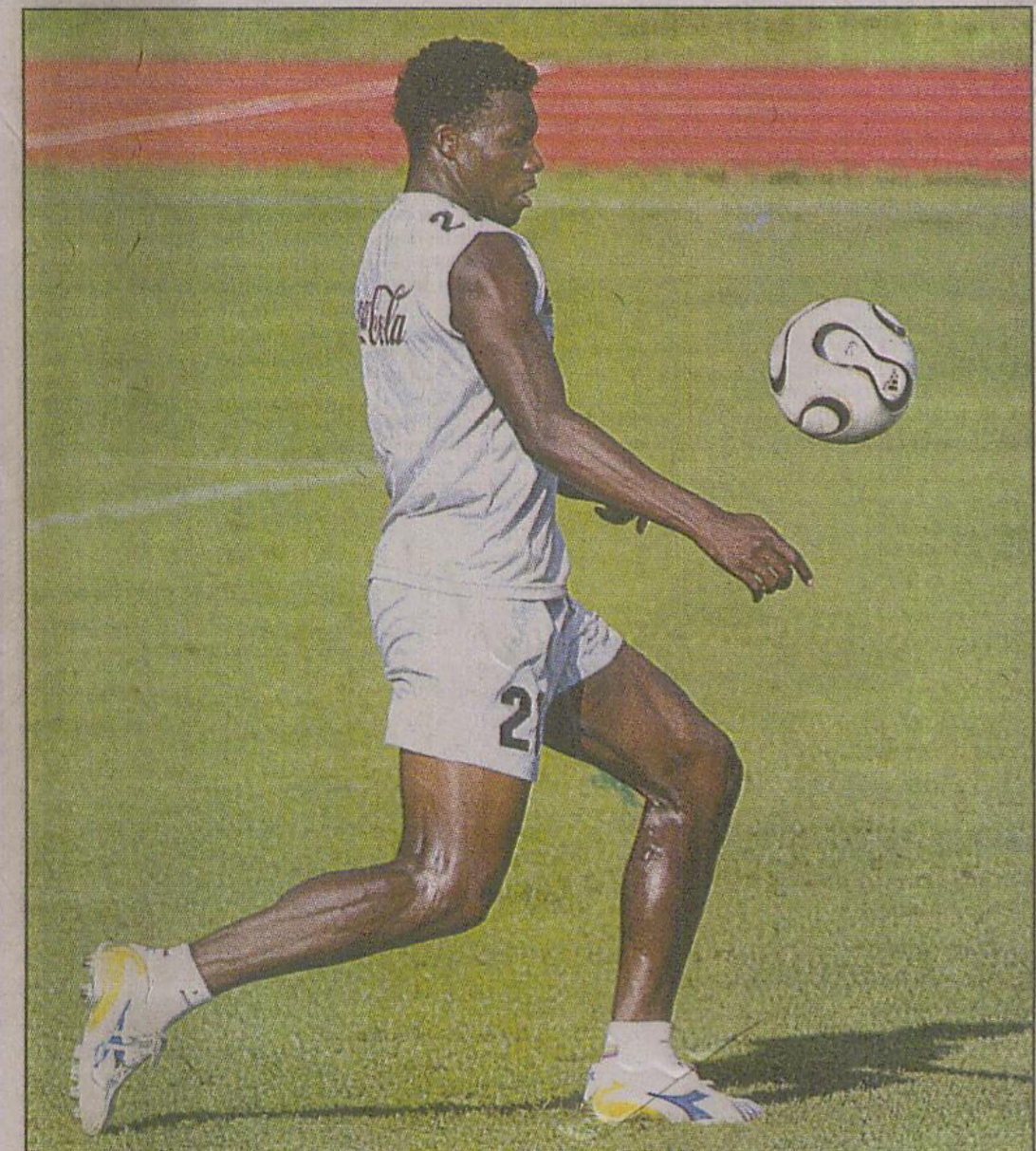
England coach Eriksson: "Normally we concede very little on set pieces but (against Sweden) two goals... of course we have to do better because we cannot concede goals like that. It's a little bit annoying to concede from a corner and a long throw-in."

Captain David Beckham: "At some point it will click and we need that to be very soon. But we're very positive about this. We have got players all the way through the team who can score goals, including defenders."

Ecuador defender Ulises de la Cruz, who plays for English club Aston Villa: "I've played many times with Rooney and everybody in the England team. I understand the tactics, the system and the players. England have good players playing all over the pitch. But everybody is focused, this is a good time for Ecuador."

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Ecuador v England head-to-head record
1970: Ecuador 0 England 2 (Quito)



GETTING READY FOR ENGLAND: Ecuador forward Carlos Tenorio honing his ball-controlling skills during a training session in Bad Kissingen on Friday.

Defensive troubles solvable

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham insists England can put a 'bad day' behind them on Sunday and reach the last eight of the World Cup.

The England captain acknowledged the defensive performance in the 2-2 draw with Sweden on Tuesday was far from impressive.

But he insists the team are in good shape ahead of Sunday's second round match with Ecuador in Stuttgart.

He told a press conference: "Tuesday was a bad day for us defensively but our record defensively in competitions has been good."

"It's something that can be put right and we are doing that."

"The team are in good spirits so we have to go on from there."

"There is no reason not to be optimistic - all the players are fit, apart from Michael (Owen)."

"But the only way to get over the loss of a great player like Michael is to concentrate on the job and put the injury to one side - but not to forget about it."

Tuesday's draw meant England finished top of Group B and the Real Madrid midfielder continued: "It becomes different once you're through the group stages. Get those games out of the way and it's a different ball game."

Beckham, who scored from the spot against Argentina in 2002, insists he would be happy to step up to the spot if Sunday's match in Stuttgart went to a shoot-out.

He continued: "I'd put myself up there."

"You can prepare as much as you can on the training pitch but in a stadium with 60,000 or 70,000 watching it's different."

"We've been practising (penalties) but hopefully it won't come to that and we can finish it off in 90 minutes."

Beckham was reluctant to discuss his own form, adding: "There are agendas out there but my agenda is to win the World Cup for this team."

"We're in a very good situation,

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