

Referee expects explosive match

AFP, Berlin

Herbert Handel, the referee for Wednesday's World Cup final rematch between France and Italy, said he expected an explosive encounter but had no fears about the Stade de France clash.

Zinedine Zidane's head-butt into the chest of Marco Materazzi led to the Frenchman's sending off shortly before full-time in the July 9 final won by Italy 5-3 on penalties following a 1-1 draw after extra-time.

Italy only drew 1-1 with Lithuania in their first Euro 2008 Group B qualifier on Saturday though France beat Georgia 3-0 the same day.

"I have never been afraid before a football match in my 27-year career and I have been officiating at a high level since 1989," Handel told Monday's edition of bi-weekly football magazine Kicker.

"What has happened before is of no concern to me," added 42-year-old Handel, referring to the head-butt of the now-retired Zidane. Materazzi will also miss the game as he is serving the second match of a two-match suspension following the incident.

"Generally speaking, the teams are starting with a clean slate," Handel added. "I am well aware of the psychological and physical backdrop to this fixture."

Handel refereed the 2006 UEFA Cup final between Sevilla and Middlesbrough but did not officiate at the World Cup in Germany during the summer.

"Of course I expect an explosive encounter but above all I am looking forward to refereeing a classic European football match between two great teams who know how to play fairly," Handel continued.

Nightclub controversy for Croats

AFP, Zagreb

Three Croatian players have been punished by coach Slaven Bilic for going to a nightclub and will not play in their Euro 2008 qualifier against Russia in Moscow on Wednesday.

Strikers Bosko Balaban, Ivica Olic and midfielder Darijo Srna have been ruled out of the Group E game after an excursion to a Zagreb nightclub.

Bilic, quoted by daily newspaper Vecernji List, said: "I can't understand why three players leave the team hotel without saying a word. It's unacceptable and that is why I will not be using them."

The Croatian team have been training the last few days at Catez, in neighbouring Slovenia about 30km east of Zagreb.

President of the Croatian football federation Vlatko Markovic was disappointed. "What has happened is terrible and I'm disappointed," he said. "They are three very good players but they must be punished because they have tarnished the reputation of the team."

However the players concerned have apologised to their teammates and to Bilic, who was named coach in July.

Balaban said: "I am guilty. I made an enormous error and I have to accept the consequences."

Iraqi booter kidnapped

AFP, Baghdad

Unidentified gunmen kidnapped Ghanim Khudayer, a popular Iraqi football player, from his residence in Baghdad's western Amel neighbourhood, an official from his club said Monday.

"Gunmen wearing military uniforms and driving four-wheel drive vehicles broke into the house of Ghanim Khudayer and took him away," Sameer Kadhim, chairman of the Air Force Club said, adding the incident occurred Friday.

"We do not know the reasons for the kidnapping and also who is behind this," he said.

Kadhim said Iraqi security forces were aware of the incident and "efforts are underway to secure his release."

Ghanim's team won the 2004-2005 Iraqi soccer championship and he is considered one of the best strikers in the club.

His abduction is the latest in a spate of such incidents to hit Iraqi sportsmen, the last being the mass kidnapping of top sports officials in July, including the president of the Iraqi National Olympic Committee Ahmed al-Hejaia.



Italy midfielder Gennaro Gattuso gestures while answering journalists' questions at the National Technical Center of Coverciano in Florence on Monday.

Henry unfazed by goal drought

AFP, Clairefontaine



Arsenal striker Thierry Henry says he is getting stronger and is not worried about his goal drought this season.

Henry has yet to score for club or country in five matches this season but claims he is only just getting back to form after a tough World Cup campaign, in which he was dazed badly after an accidental knock on the head in the opening minutes in the final against Italy.

"I have said it before and I will say it again, that's the least of my worries if the team wins," insisted Henry.

"I am still not ready physically. Against Manchester City (where Arsenal lost 1-0) I could have scored four goals and I missed them all."

While France have not missed Henry's goals, beating Bosnia-Herzegovina 2-1 away in a friendly in August and winning 3-0 at Georgia in their first Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday, Arsenal possibly have, taking just one point from their opening two English Premiership matches.

For France, though, goals from

Florent Malouda and Louis Saha gave them a 2-0 half-time advantage before Henry's presence nearby saw a panicked Malkhaz Asatiani into slicing the ball over his approaching goalkeeper for a bizarre own goal.

"That feels good. It was a long time since we could control a match like we did in the second half," said Henry.

"That allowed us to save energy before the match with Italy (on Wednesday at the Stade de France in Paris)."

"Yesterday (Saturday) I felt good in my legs. I am getting stronger."

Gilberto hails The Beast

AFP, London



Gilberto Silva insists his Brazil teammate Julio Baptista is the man to replace Patrick Vieira at Arsenal.

Baptista joined the English Premiership club on a years loan from Real Madrid and Arsenal's Gilberto is looking forward to forming a formidable partnership with him in the Gunners' midfield.

Since the departure of France star Vieira to Juventus last season, Arsene Wenger's side have lacked a physical presence to compete with some of the Premier's more aggressive sides.

That absence of steel has seen Arsenal fall behind the likes of Manchester United and Liverpool in the race to challenge for Chelsea's Premiership title.

But Gilberto believes former Seville player Baptista, who got his first taste of life at the Emirates Stadium in Brazil's 3-0 friendly win against Argentina on Sunday, can make the difference.

Gilberto said: "I think Julio will offer us a lot of things. He's a fantastic player and will bring a lot of experience. He has got great strength and will be an important player for us."

"I will help him and introduce him to the club. I don't think he'll find any difficulty adapting to life here."

"I think he can replace Vieira. We need world class players to challenge the strong teams like Chelsea and Julio will help us do that."

"I spoke to him and he was happy to move to Arsenal because we have a good team. Now he has a good chance to play football and I will help him to settle."

"I have a responsibility to help him settle at the club. Edu helped me when I first came here and I will do the same for Julio."

Baptista claimed he would be happy to stay in London on a permanent basis and said: "I am very happy to sign a four year contract."

"But after the one year loan it is up to Arsenal to discuss with Real Madrid if they want to keep me. Hopefully they will say yes and I can stay."

"I am very humbled that Arsene

Wenger was so interested in me. I will be very happy to stay here for a long time, as long as the club wants me."

"It was very nice and I am so happy to be made so welcome at my new ground. I just hope I am made to feel this welcome when I play in the Premiership. I am confident I will be a good acquisition to the team."

The surprise star of Brazil's win over their old enemies was Shakhtar Donetsk midfielder Elano, who scored twice in just his fourth appearance.

Elano admitted he could not have expected the match to go so well and said: "This is one of the happiest days of my life. It is like a dream, but it is actually a reality."

"(Brazil coach) Dunga told us to never give up and to be focused and never give up."

"I am proud that I did what he said. I played my part in a game that we deserved to win because we played the better football."

Forget goal fest: Klose

AFP, Stuttgart



Miroslav Klose says Germany must stick to basics against San Marino in Wednesday's Euro 2008 Group D qualifier

and not try to rack up a tennis score against one of the smallest nations in Europe.

Klose, who won the Golden Boot at the World Cup, could be forgiven for thinking about swelling his goals tally of 31 in 63 internationals but the Werder Bremen forward is not getting overconfident.

"We want to win this game and that is all that counts. I am not thinking of scoring three or four goals myself," Klose said at Monday's press conference.

"San Marino will be compact and defend in numbers but we already know that. It is up to us to break them down and we will not make the mistake of underestimating them."

Germany defeated the Republic of Ireland 1-0 in their opening Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday and Klose hopes for a more convincing display against San Marino.

"It was difficult against Ireland and we did not do everything we wanted to," Klose admitted.

"If we had scored early on it could have been a comfortable victory so we hope it goes better against San Marino in that respect."

"Victory by a few clear goals would be ideal but it all depends on how early the breakthrough comes."

It is Germany's first competitive away match in over two years - with the last being their 2-1 Euro 2004 group defeat to the Czech Republic in Lisbon - and Klose acknowledges the team need to get used to not having the home fans that spurred them on at the World Cup.

"It is all so different after the World Cup and we have to get used to playing abroad," the 28-year-old added.

"I do not know how many specta-

tors will be there but it will not be like a home game, that is for sure."



Germany striker Miroslav Klose does a keeppy-uppy routine at a training session with the national team in Stuttgart on Monday.

Italy unchanged

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni said he did not intend to make any changes ahead of the World Cup final rematch against France although they only drew 1-1 against Lithuania in Naples this weekend.

The reigning world champions were far from impressive against the Baltic nation but Donadoni said he saw no reason to bring in new faces for Wednesday's Euro 2008 Group B qualifier in Paris.

"I am not going to make any changes for the match against France," said Donadoni at their Coverciano training centre in Florence. "I'm proud of the players and the whole squad."

"What happens if we return from the French game with only a point (after two matches)?" added Donadoni when asked about possible defeat at the Stade de France.

"If that happens, I will answer after the match. But I could turn the question round and ask myself what if we came back with four points? It's great to play our World Cup final opponents again."

US surgery for Owen

AFP, London

Newcastle striker Michael Owen headed for surgery in the United States on Monday full of optimism he would be able to completely recover from his knee problems.

Specialist Richard Steadman carried out one procedure during the summer to repair the 26-year-old's cartilage and prepare Owen for ligament surgery.

The 17-million-pound (25.2-million-euro) frontman will undergo an operation to mend his ruptured anterior cruciate ligament in Colorado later this week before starting the long haul back to fitness.

Owen said: "I will be having the operation done in a couple of days, and I'm confident that with positive thinking, I will be back and as good as ever."

"It's an operation that needs to be done, it's the cruciate as everyone knows, and to be honest, I'm looking forward to it because it is a chunk of light for me."

The England forward's knee was ripped apart in a freak accident just seconds into England's World Cup group match against Sweden in June.

It came just weeks after his return to action for the Magpies following his recovery from a fractured metatarsal.

He has managed just 11 appearances for the club since his move from Real Madrid in August last year, but the seven goals he scored in those games illustrated his quality.

Manager Glenn Roeder may have to do without his star striker for the entire campaign, although Owen is determined to return as quickly as possible.

He told the club's official website, www.nufc.co.uk: "I have been basically biding my time since the first operation to prepare for this one and once it is out of the way, I can get on with the rehabilitation."

"At the start of the rehab, it will just be about getting the knee moving and trying to keep up my general fitness, but it will get tougher as I get nearer to a comeback."

"The plan is to get as fit as I can through the rehab so I don't have to play in too many reserve games or practice games, and my obvious aim is to get back into the first team as quickly as I can."

Owen's absence has been compounded by Alan Shearer's retirement, Shola Ameobi's own fitness concerns and Michael Chopra's departure for Cardiff.

Roeder spent 10 million pounds on Nigerian international Obafemi Martins, took Manchester United starlet Giuseppe Rossi on loan and failed with a late bid for Middlesbrough Mark Viduka as he attempted to plug the gap during the summer transfer window.

Portugal without Martins, Meira

AFP, Lisbon

Fernando Meira and Carlos Martins will miss Portugal's first Euro 2008 championship qualifier against Finland in Helsinki on Wednesday because of leg muscle injuries.

Stuttgart defender Meira, 28, injured his right calf muscle on Thursday, causing him to miss Portugal's 4-2 friendly loss to Denmark one day later at Brondby.

The 24-year-old Sporting Lisbon midfielder Martins injured his left thigh muscle on Sunday. He earned his first international cap on Friday against Denmark, coming on as a substitute in the final minutes of the first half.

"They won't be able to play on Wednesday," team doctor Henrique Jones told the Lusa news agency at the end of the squad's final training session in Denmark before the team heads to Finland.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari did not replace the two players.

Dialogue the key: Dunga



AFP, London

Brazil coach Dunga believes improved dialogue with his team is the key to ensuring there is no repeat of their World Cup failure.

The five-time world champions were well below their best in Germany and slumped to a quarterfinal exit against France.

That disappointing display was greeted with anger back in Brazil and coach Carlos Alberto Parreira was forced out after the tournament, with Dunga taking over.

The former Brazilian midfielder knows exactly what it takes to win the World Cup after captaining his country to glory in the 1994 tournament.

And although he has a galaxy of gifted stars like Ronaldinho, Kaka and Ronaldo at his disposal, Dunga is adamant his players must express themselves off the pitch if they want to be world champions again.

After watching his team demolish Argentina 3-0 in a friendly match at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium on Sunday, Dunga said: "Brazil always has quality. The important thing is we all work to the common good."

"It is not right for me to talk about a group I was not part of but I know that during the World Cup there were a few things that did not go right and we wanted to change that."

"Everyone knows I'm a new coach so I have talked to the play-

ers to get their opinions. Many times we hear only from the coach and that is not good for the players."

"They have to be free to give their opinions. My decision will be final but I want to know how they feel about the direction of the team."

A double strike from Shakhtar Donetsk midfielder Elano and a superb solo goal from AC Milan's Kaka gave Brazil a convincing win in Dunga's second match in charge.

Brazil face Wales at White Hart Lane on Tuesday and Dunga, who hopes to have Ronaldinho back from a thigh injury for that match, knows the win against old enemies Argentina will give him time to rebuild his team.

He said: "We managed to win against a fantastic team. It is a big rivalry and every game between us is a war."

"That gives us time to work but we cannot relax because we know how much expectation there is on the Brazil team."

"I'm starting to feel more like a coach now. I'm not eating well and I can't sleep. But I was missing that adrenaline in my life. Now I have a challenge."

Argentina coach Alfio Basile endured a dismal first match in charge after returning for his second spell as national team boss.

His side looked good in possession but had no answer to a superb display from Real Madrid striker Robinho.

Basile said: "The result was not expected but it cannot be changed. It was my first match and I worked

with the players for very little time.

"We only had 48 hours together. We need to work together for longer and that was reflected on the pitch."

"Brazil were very good and they didn't allow us many chances, but I'm not worried. This is just the beginning."

"The positive aspect is the attitude of the team. We wanted to win and attacked. That is what I want to see."

"With the quality of player we have I should be able to have the team playing how I want it in two or three months."

Argentine duo Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano were both below their best as they played for the first time since their surprise transfer deadline-day move to English Premiership club West Ham from Corinthians of Brazil.

But Basile has no doubts they will develop as players in England and he said: "They are already players of top international quality so they would be good to any team that buys them. That is why they are in the Argentina team."

"All I can say is whether they are at Chelsea or West Ham they will still be in the international team because they are players of the highest quality."

"I think the move will make them both better players because it is a very competitive league."

"It is one of the best leagues in the world and it's obvious that anyone who plays in an important league will grow as a player."

'Hargreaves is our Makelele'



AFP, London

John Terry believes England have unearthed the new Claude Makelele in the shape of midfield anchor-man Owen Hargreaves.

Bayern Munich star Hargreaves was booed by England's fans at the start of the World Cup but finished the tournament as one of the team's few success stories and has now nailed down a place in Steve McClaren's starting XI.

And England skipper Terry is one of Hargreaves' biggest fans, believing he compares favourably to Chelsea teammate Makelele,

widely regarded as the world's finest holding midfielder.

"I think Owen Hargreaves has slotted in perfectly," Terry enthused following England's 5-0 Euro 2008 Championship qualifier win over Andorra on Saturday.

"You can compare Owen to 'Maka' at Chelsea. Like Maka he breaks the play up brilliantly. If anyone gets past him, then they still have us to beat in the defence but he is certainly not easy to get past."

Hargreaves biting presence in midfield had allowed England's more attack-minded players licence to roam, Terry said.

"I think the attacking midfielders appreciate having Owen in there

as well, knowing he will sit back if we are on the attack," Terry said.

Hargreaves' midfield partner Frank Lampard was also full of praise for his minder. "Owen is playing very well. He is full of confidence. He is carrying on where he left off at the World Cup," Lampard said.

"He is breaking things up but also had a couple of shots on Saturday when he might have scored. It is great to see a player playing with confidence," he added.

England face Macedonia in their second Euro qualifier in Skopje on Wednesday.



France defenders Lilian Thuram (L) and Eric Abidal run during a training session in Clairefontaine on Sunday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
 1 In olden days
 4 Money of Thailand
 8 Hoosier
 12 Comic DeLuise
 13 Ca-booze's position
 14 Part of HOMES
 15 Ordinate's counter-part
 17 Writer Kingsley
 18 Gilbert & Sullivan leader
 19 Johnson or Cliburn wife
 21 You can't stand to have it
 22 Soak in
 26 In any way
 29 Snaps
 31 Parks or Bonheur call
 32 Crony
 33 Pieces' mate
 34 Mischief-maker
 35 Sly one

DOWN
 1 Leading man
 2 Asian desert
 3 Russian city
 4 Re-weddings
 5 Man of morals?
 6 Owns
 7 Labor
 8 Casual wear
 9 It's up your sleeve
 10 Midafternoon, on a sundial
 11 "— Miserables"
 16 Lily variety
 20 Where "Lost" is found
 23 Leave out
 24 Campus mil. grp.
 25 "Non-sense"
 26 "Turandot" tune
 27 Macabre chamber
 28 Snakes
 29 Bygone TV network
 32 Danced to
 33 Major-ette's prop
 35 Cod piece
 36 Red shade
 38 Two quartets
 39 Twangy
 42 Beehive State
 43 Old woman's home?
 44 Group-up elvers
 45 Book-keeper (abbr.)
 46 Wheel center
 47 Work with
 49 Support system?

Solution time: 25 mins.

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CRYPTOQUIP
 T E E X H J - C N Y Y N P E H J J Z
 V J N S O H J N U S J N X M O Q N
 O Q X M N , V X H C P Z X H U S Z T O U
 J N T Y M T M Y V S O U S M P P X Y U ?
 Yesterday's Cryptquip: MUSICAL ABOUT A SIAMESE MONARCH REALLY BOTHERED BY A CHRONIC NECK AILMENT: "THE KINK AND L"
 Today's Cryptquip Clue: E equals F
 The Cryptquip 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.