

Totti close to Azzurri return

INTERNET, undated

Italy Coach Roberto Donadoni has revealed that several World Cup-winning stars are close to returning including Francesco Totti.

The Azzurri face a European Championship qualifying double-header with Ukraine and Georgia next month, having drawn with Lithuania and been defeated by France thus far.

"I think I will have the world champions at my disposal, but a lot depends on them," said Donadoni in Rome on Monday, before meeting the UEFA officials who are evaluating Italy's candidacy for hosting the 2012 European Championship.

"I have no favourites, all the players know that I am observing everyone with no exception.

Our only task is to work hard from now until the next matches on October 7 and 11 we our physical condition is improving, our opponents are still at a further stage in their preparation.

"We need these six points and I trust I will be able to have everyone I need at my disposal this would make me very happy.

"Francesco Totti? He is determined to recover quickly and I can see that he is working hard. His return to the Nazionale only depends on him."

Ballack apologises to Sissoko

REUTERS, London

Chelsea's Germany captain Michael Ballack apologised to Liverpool's Mohamed Sissoko on Sunday after he stamped on the Mali midfielder's leg and was sent off during a fiery Premier League match.

Ballack was shown the first straight red card of his career by referee Mike Riley for violent conduct six minutes into the second half.

He will miss the next three games.

The Chelsea midfielder waited outside the Liverpool dressing room to offer his apologies after the game.

"It's a bad situation for me," a softly spoken Ballack said. "It is the first straight red in my career.

"I didn't mean to injure him. I've just seen him now and I've said sorry," he added.

"In the second half these situations can happen. It was bad for me. The team worked very hard after this and we went on to win the game."



Marseille forward Mickael Pagis (C) is congratulated by his teammates after scoring a goal during their Ligue 1 clash against Bordeaux at the Velodrome on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Owen vows to return

AFP, London

Michael Owen has revealed that the operation on his knee will not bring an end to his career.

Owen, who had the cruciate ligament operation performed earlier this month in the United States, told The Times newspaper how he was given the good news as soon as he came round at the clinic in Denver.

"When I came round after my cruciate ligament operation the surgeon was standing by my bedside.

"Whatever makes you retire from football it won't be your knee", he told me straight away.

"Coming from a man as respected as Dr Richard Steadman that was the perfect way to wake up.

"Perhaps it was walking into his office and seeing all the signed shirts and thank-you letters from dozens of grateful sportsmen, including plenty of familiar names, Alan Shearer, Henrik Larsson, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Craig Bellamy."

Owen, 26, added that he had received a lot of support from England boss Steve McClaren since rupturing his anterior cruciate knee ligament during the 2-2 draw with Sweden in the World Cup in June.

"Steve McClaren has been supportive, inviting me to drop by the England team hotel before the game against Andorra. It's nice to know that people are willing you to return, although I have been impressed at how the boys have played without myself or Wayne Rooney.

"It will be frustrating watching others rattle in goals for club and country but I am fortunate in that I don't suffer low periods when I am out with injuries.

"That is part of the mental strength that has served me so well, and which I am certain will see me banging in the goals in 2007."

Roeder worried about Given

AFP, London

Glenn Roeder has confirmed that Shay Given's condition will be monitored closely over the next 48 hours after the stricken goalkeeper spent Sunday night in a London hospital.

Given was involved in a sickening collision with Marlon Harewood during the latter stages of his sides 2-0 win at West Ham, a victory that came courtesy of second-half goals from Damien Duff and Obafemi Martins.

And after the goalkeeper was taken from the field on a stretcher, an ambulance was called when he complained of further stomach pains in the 20 minutes following the end of the match.

"We needed to get Shay into the best hands possible and it would have been unwise to have put him back onto the aeroplane when he was still feeling uncomfortable," said Roeder, who was barracked by the Hammers fans as he returned to Upton Park three years after he was sacked as West Ham boss.

"He's been very badly winded and he was still feeling discomfort 20 minutes or so after the game. What that discomfort is I don't know, but he's in fantastic hands.

"We have a club doctor who travels to every game with us and he's been given the best supervision possible. We will continue to monitor him."

Jol frustrated

AFP, London

Tottenham boss Martin Jol admitted he is being driven crazy by his side's dismal start to the season.

The north Londoners were held to a goalless home draw by Fulham on Sunday and have picked up just four points from their opening five matches.

Jol admits it is frustrating to watch his team miss chances to move up the Premiership table.

"The strikers are not finishing as they should be and the midfield is not providing enough," he said.

"To say I'm disappointed is a bit of an understatement. Sometimes I can be a bit negative, but the players must try to remain positive.

"Fulham defended in numbers but I knew we would find it difficult if we did not score early. I have to take some positives from today but I was looking for more points on board."

Robbie Keane started the match alongside Mido, as England striker Jermain Defoe dropped down to the substitutes bench. Tom Huddlestone was also left out from the side which defeated Slavia Prague on Thursday night as Danny Murphy began the game.

Moritz Volz got his first start of the season for Fulham as he stepped into the unfamiliar role of right midfielder.

The away side who created the first opportunity of the match.

Collins John quickly broke away for Fulham and his fierce drive was well dealt with by goalkeeper Paul Robinson.

Keane had half a chance to find a way through on 20 minutes as Jermaine Jenas picked him out with a neat through ball. However, Keane's touch was too strong and Antti Niemi reacted quickly to smother the ball.

Teemu Tainio hit two shots in quick succession wide of the target as the half hour mark approached, but Jol's side were finding it difficult to test Niemi.

On 40 minutes Benoit Assou-Ekotto almost broke the deadlock. The Tottenham full-back cut inside Collins John but his shot from a tight angle was blocked by Niemi.

Five minutes after half-time Mido headed wide from a King cross. The Egyptian almost made amends for the miss eight minutes later, though, Tainio found him on the left but Mido's fierce drive from a tight angle struck the crossbar.

With 20 minutes left Spurs increased the pressure on Fulham by introducing Defoe to the frame for a three-pronged attack.

But it was Pascal Chimbonda who almost scored as his header from a Keane corner was cleared off the line by Fulham substitute Heidar Helguson, and Defoe came close with a fierce drive.

Fulham almost snatched a winner through Volz four minutes from time, but Robinson made a good block.

Mourinho won't punish Ballack

AFP, London



Jose Mourinho will not take disciplinary action against Michael Ballack for his sending off which marred Chelsea's 1-0 victory over Liverpool at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Ballack was shown a straight red card by Mike Riley for a blatant stamp on Mohamed Sissoko and Mourinho has no arguments with the decision, which will result in a three-match suspension for the Germany midfielder.

"The red card for Ballack is a deserved red card and I am not complaining. He arrives late and the ball is not there anymore. He stamped on Sissoko and it is a red card," said Mourinho.

"I am not angry with Ballack. I have had a word with him. He is not 20-years old. He is an experienced player and has had a long career.

"This is the first time he has been sent off. That shows what kind of character and personality he is on the pitch. He goes there to fight and to put his foot in.

"He told me that he tried to win the ball and that he had no desire to injure the player. If he does not win the ball, then the rules on red cards are very clear."

Despite agreeing with the sending off, Mourinho believes that

Ballack's sending off could have been avoided if Riley had awarded a second yellow card to Sissoko for a tackle on Lampard after he had already been booked.

"It was not Mr Riley's day. Sometimes it is not the manager's day. Sometimes it is not the player's day. We need to give some protection to the referee," added Mourinho.

"Everyone knows that it was a second yellow card and Sissoko should have been sent off. Then we would have had 11 against ten men and would have had a 1-0 lead."

Despite the irresponsible actions of Ballack, ten-man Chelsea managed to extend their dominance over Liverpool at Stamford Bridge -- a match watched by superstar golfer Tiger Woods -- collecting their 11th win in their last 15 encounters, thanks to an inspired piece of finishing from Didier Drogba for his fourth goal in five games.

Andriy Shevchenko had another disappointing afternoon and was substituted after 65 minutes for the fit-again winger Arjen Robben, but Mourinho is convinced that the Ukrainian international a British record signing from AC Milan in pre-season, will soon hit form.

"He is not having problems adapting to England or our style. Our style is the same one that he played for all his time at AC Milan," added Mourinho.

"We play the same diamond. I

want more from him, everyone wants more from him and he wants more from himself. He will score goals and I am sure he will finish among the top goalscorers in the Premiership."

Liverpool have failed to score in their last three Premiership games and have not won an away game in a disappointing start to a season in which manager Rafael Benitez was hoping to put even more pressure on Chelsea for the title.

But the Spaniard is unfazed by the situation and the gap that has already opened up before them. He is confident that his team are getting better and could have proved that by taking their opportunities against Chelsea.

"In our last three games we have created more chances than the home team but we have not won. I know that we will start scoring goals," said Benitez.

"It is frustrating because we were the better team in the first half against Chelsea and we had very good chances, but we failed to take them.

"And we should have had a penalty in the second half when there was a clear push on (Steven) Gerrard by (Frank) Lampard in the penalty area, but we cannot affect things after the game."

Midweek hosts first title clash

REUTERS, Rome



AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti has warned his team not to get carried away by their good start to the Serie A season ahead of their midweek clash with champions Inter Milan.

Roma are joint top of the division with Palermo on six points from two matches after beating Siena 3-1 on Sunday and host Inter on Wednesday.

"Let's just keep our feet on the ground. You can't afford to get carried away after two games,"

Spalletti was quoted as saying in La Gazzetta dello Sport on Monday.

"Of course, we will do our best, and the team is more mature than it was a year ago.

"But Inter and AC Milan have a little bit extra compared to us, and I'm not talking just about their players."

Before the season started, Roma captain Francesco Totti said he didn't think the team was capable of challenging for the scudetto.

But three wins in nine days, including a 4-0 victory over Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League, has raised Roma fans' hopes that their team could challenge for their first Serie A title since 2001.

Wednesday's game will be a repeat of August's Italian Super Cup final at the San Siro stadium, in which Roma squandered a 3-0 lead to lose 4-3 in extra-time.

It was a result that infuriated Spalletti, who reminded his players that they could not afford to make a similar series of defensive errors.

"So far this season we lost the only match that had a title riding on it. Therefore we can't be so great as people keep telling us," he said.

"There are some aspects of our game -- as we showed in Milan -- that we still need to work on.

"And when there's an atmosphere of high expectation like this it becomes as hard to deal with the victories as with the defeats."

No need to panic: Magath

AFP, Bielefeld



Bayern Munich coach Felix Magath is refusing to press the panic button after Saturday's shock 2-1 defeat to Arminia Bielefeld saying his squad of internationals need time to get going.

A late free-kick from Danish winger Jonas Kamber condemned Bayern to their first defeat of the season in Bielefeld and their return of seven points is not that of championship material.

Magath watched his team hammer Spartak Moscow 4-0 in the Champions League in midweek and believes the football calendar is behind the poor results in the league.

"I do not want to make excuses but the match calendar has certainly not helped," said Magath.

"There has been an international break, the domestic cup, the Champions League and back to the league.

"I have said all along that our international players -- and we have a lot of them -- will need until the end of September to get back to their best.

"I am sure we will find our rhythm soon and not lose games like this."

Despite one point from their last two league matches reigning champions Bayern can take comfort from the fact that they are third in the table as their rivals fail to capitalise on their slips.

Werder Bremen, regarded as Munich's main rivals, could have gone top of the table with victory against VfB Stuttgart on Saturday but lost 3-2 after surrendering a two-goal lead.

Bremen dropped down to seventh with the shock defeat and manager Thomas Schaaf was furious.

"The time for talking is over now we need action," said Schaaf. "We went two goals up but then stopped going into tackles and were punished."

SV Hamburg, third last season, also lost 1-0 to Borussia Dortmund and their title bid looks over before it has started.

Hamburg have just three points from the first four matches and have failed to win in the new campaign.

"We are in a dip but we can't start asking questions of what we have built over the past two years," explained manager Thomas Doll.

The poor form of Bremen and Hamburg -- who both crashed out of the first round of the German cup -- is certainly a boost for Bayern while they are not firing on all cylinders.

However one major concern for Bayern and Magath will be the injury to England international midfielder Owen Hargreaves.

Hargreaves broke his leg in the defeat to Bielefeld and now faces a lengthy spell on the sidelines.

"I need to wear a plaster for three weeks, then we have to wait and see how the recovery goes," said the 25-year-old Hargreaves, who was linked to Manchester United before the transfer window closed at the beginning of September.

"That's the way it is in football," he said. "Sometimes you are flying high and all of a sudden you are down again."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

A crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. The clues include words like 'Monty Python' opener, 'Fly high', 'E.T.'s craft', 'Koda-chrome', 'AAA job', 'Space-craft compartment', 'Payable', 'Line dance', 'Simpleton', 'In need of repair', 'Meditation exercise', 'Doctrine', 'Part of TWIMC', 'Shade', 'Phony', 'Supporter of the arts', 'Fencing with bamboo swords', 'Christmas garland', and 'Tease'.

A cryptic crossword puzzle grid with numerical clues for the starting positions of the words. The grid is 11x11.

CRYPTOQUIP
M A V I G Z N J K G D V J N D O
P M G A I S W J E E O W J I A E O
J I V G D Z F W F K O V M A Z N I
"KGSZ V G K W P G P W F."
Yesterday's Cryptquip: AT FIRST I DIDN'T LIKE HOW MY FINGERNAILS LOOKED, BUT THEY HAD BEGUN GROWING ON ME.
Today's Cryptquip Clue: P equals W
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.