



PHOTO: AFP

THEY ARE BACK: Controversial Italian defender Marco Materazzi (R) looks on as forwards Filippo Inzaghi (L) and Vincenzo Iaquinta speak during a training session for the national team in Florence on Tuesday.

Stars inspire Donadoni

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni was optimistic the world champions would get their Euro 2008 qualifying campaign back on track after naming a star-studded squad for qualifiers against Ukraine and Georgia.

After experimenting with unfamiliar players in his first three matches in charge, Donadoni has reverted to type for the qualifiers against Ukraine in Rome on Saturday and

Georgia away four days later. His 25-man squad includes 19 who returned in triumph from the World Cup, and several who have not played since Donadoni took over from Marcello Lippi a few days after the final in Berlin in July.

"There are some changes, as is normal. That's because our general state of form is better and I've got more players to choose from," Donadoni was quoted as saying on La Gazzetta dello Sport's Web site.

The world champions were missing six first-team regulars when they drew 1-1 with Lithuania and lost

3-1 to France in their first two qualifiers last month.

Marco Materazzi was suspended, Alessandro Nesta injured and Mauro Camoranesi, Luca Toni, Vincenzo Iaquinta and Alessandro Del Piero were all left out because Donadoni felt they were behind in their physical preparation due to the late start of the Serie A season.

Italy's strikers have recently shown signs of regaining form. Toni scored in Fiorentina's 3-0 win over Catania at the weekend, while Del Piero set up both goals in Juventus's 2-0 victory at Piacenza in Serie B.

"Like Toni, Del Piero was one of the players who was furthest behind in his preparation, but now he is getting back to his best," said Donadoni.

Italy lie sixth out of seven teams in Group B with one point from two matches, five points behind joint leaders France and Scotland.

Italy beat the Ukraine 3-0 on the way to winning the World Cup but Donadoni said it would be a mis

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Grosso misses out

AFP, Rome

World champions Italy are expected to be without Fabio Grosso for Saturday's crunch 2008 European championship qualifier against Ukraine.

The left-sided Inter Milan defender, who scored the winning penalty-kick in the World Cup final, has a right thigh strain and according to Italian media reports is very doubtful for the match at Rome's Olympic stadium.

Grosso will have a scan later on Tuesday while the rest of the squad train at their Coverciano base in Florence.

Should Grosso fail to recover in time, Barcelona's Gianluca Zambrotta will probably play on the left of Italy's defence with Lazio's Massimo Oddo on the right.

After the Ukraine match this weekend, Italy face Georgia in Tbilisi the following Wednesday.

The Azzurri are desperate for positive results from their next two qualifiers having taken just one point from their first two games against Lithuania and France.

The 2008 European championships will be held jointly by Switzerland and Austria.

Bung inquiry extended

AFP, London

The inquiry into illegal payments in English football has been extended by two months, with former Metropolitan Police commissioner Lord Stevens revealing Monday that 39 transfers will require further examination.

The transfers centre around eight English league clubs and Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore said that Lord Stevens' Quest team will be given a further two months to complete their work.

"This is something Premier League clubs wanted to do, and has been done with full support of the clubs who wanted a thorough, professional and credible process to deal effectively with any irregular transfer payments," Scudamore told a press conference.

"We have as a group unanimously agreed to extend the period of inquiry by two months in order to investigate transfers that are in need of further investigation."

Lord Stevens and his team looked into 362 transfers, covering the period from January 1, 2004 to January 31, 2006.

"I have briefed all of the chairmen and chief executives of

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Inquiry focuses on eight clubs

Football

REUTERS, London

The head of an English Premier League inquiry said on Monday his investigation into alleged irregular payments in transfer dealings was now focused on eight top-flight clubs.

Delivering his interim report into alleged corruption by agents, managers and clubs, former London police chief John Stevens said his seven-month investigation into 362

transfers in a two-year period from Jan. 1, 2004 to Jan. 31, 2006 had been whittled down to 39 that needed further scrutiny.

Stevens, who was given a further two months by the Premier League to complete the inquiry, called for patience, saying his team were in possession of "an unprecedented amount of intelligence."

"The Quest team has managed to examine all 362 transfers and reduce (the number) down to 39 within the English game which require further investigation," Stevens, who did not "name or

shame" individuals or clubs, told a news conference at a London hotel.

Stevens said all 29 Premier League clubs coming under his remit in the two-year period had fully co-operated. Four of those - Watford, Sheffield United, Reading and Leeds United - have been eliminated from his inquiry.

Asked if he had found a "bung culture", Stevens refused to answer but said: "There is a large amount of work to be done. We will get to the bottom of what the problems are but you must be patient."

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PHOTO: AFP

DOWNSIDE UP: Sporting Lisbon's Nani (C) executes a somersault after scoring during their Portuguese league match against Leiria in Lisbon on Monday.

Sporting sail, Porto fail

REUTERS, Lisbon

Sporting joined champions Porto at the top of the Portuguese Premier League with a 2-0 home win over Uniao Leiria on Monday.

Porto retained the lead on goal difference despite slipping to their first defeat of the season, 2-1 at Braga.

Porto and Sporting have 12 points from five games with Naval, who beat Beira Mar 2-1 at home on Friday, in third place.

Braga opened the scoring after 24 minutes through Brazilian striker Marcel, who connected with a neat cross from the left by his compatriot Wender.

Porto, without injured Slovakian defender Marek Cech and Brazilian striker Adriano, equalised three minutes before halftime through a header by striker Helder Postiga from a left-wing cross by winger Ricardo Quaresma.

Braga, the only Portuguese team to qualify for the UEFA Cup's group phase, went ahead again when defender Luis Filipe scored with a surprise shot after 56 minutes.

Sporting overcame 10-man Uniao Leiria 2-0 on a rainy evening in Lisbon. Winger Nani put Sporting in front after 34 minutes, tapping in a cross from the right by Brazilian striker Alessandro.

Brazilian striker Liedson sealed the three points from a penalty, his first goal of the season.

Seventh-placed Leiria were reduced to 10 men after 73 minutes when defender Eder received his second yellow card for a foul on Nani.

Benfica grabbed their second win this season when they crushed promoted Desportivo Aves 4-1 at home on Sunday.

Benfica have seven points and one game in hand.

Moratti questioned over wiretrap

AP, Rome

Inter Milan owner Massimo Moratti was questioned for two hours Tuesday amid allegations that his club requested the wiretaps that helped uncover the Italian match-fixing scandal.

Moratti, who has denied the allegations, met with Italian soccer federation lead investigator Francesco Saverio Borrelli.

"We cleared up what there was to clear," Moratti told the Apcom news agency. "I hope I don't have to come back."

Borrelli said he didn't yet know "if the investigation will come up with anything or not."

"I don't think it will be necessary to question him again, as long as new documents don't arrive," Borrelli told the ANSA news agency. "But we don't consider this inquiry finished yet."

Juventus was stripped of its last two Serie A titles and relegated to the second division with a 17-point penalty by a sports tribunal in July for its leading role in the scandal.

Four other Serie A clubs - AC Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio and

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Coach plays down Cassano omission

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni insisted Monday he did not leave Antonio Cassano out of his squad for the crunch Euro 2008 qualifiers against Ukraine and Georgia because he feared the temperamental striker would receive a bad reception on his return to the capital.

The world champions host Ukraine here on Saturday at the Olympic stadium where Cassano played for Serie A side Roma before leaving to join Spanish giants Real Madrid in January.

Cassano left Roma under a cloud after falling out with the coaching staff and the club's volatile fans over his perceived poor attitude.

The 24-year-old could have expected a far from welcoming reception on Saturday given that the stadium will be made up mostly of Roma fans.

But Donadoni is adamant Cassano was not picked for his squad for technical reasons, and because he is carrying a slight injury.

"Everyone is entitled to their own opinion about him, but I make the choices based on condition and form," Donadoni said at Monday's press conference at Italy's training camp in Coverciano, Florence.

"On a scale of one to 10 when I was considering whether to pick him, the concern about a potential protest against him was less than two."

"But those left out have not been rejected - the door to the national team is open to every player."

After facing Ukraine, who Italy beat 3-0 in the quarter-finals of the World Cup, the Azzurri take on Georgia in Tbilisi the following Wednesday.

Italy have taken just one point

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Van Basten walking the gallows

Football

AFP, The Hague

The jury remains out on Netherlands coach Marco van Basten following the refusal of two former national team players to join up with the squad for crucial Euro 2008 qualifiers.

Mark van Bommel and Ruud van Nistelrooy said Monday they would not be honouring international call-ups to play against Bulgaria and Albania on October 7 and 11 respectively.

And that has left the Dutch press, who are still simmering over a perceived fiasco at the World Cup, divided over the coaching credentials of the man who enjoyed a hugely successful playing career

with AC Milan and Holland.

"Van Basten has blinkers on and is not professional," commented the Algemeen Dagblad (AD), publishing the opinions of a management specialist.

The specialist believes that van Basten made a serious error of communication when he kept van Bommel and van Nistelrooy on the sidelines at the World Cup without having discussed it with the pair first.

"Van Basten is limited when it comes to putting himself in the shoes of others," the newspaper added.

Van Basten, part of the Dutch team that won the 1988 European championships, included van Bommel in his World Cup squad but the pair did not see eye-to-eye as the Netherlands lost 1-0 to Portugal

at the last 16 stage.

After some lacklustre displays, van Nistelrooy was left on the bench for an ill-tempered defeat 1-0 defeat to Portugal which handed them entry to the quarter-finals stage.

Some of the country's top athletes were asked by De Volkskrant newspaper about van Basten's apparent unforgiving style.

The opinions ranged from the abusive: "He is inexplicably brutal with the players", to the defensive: "van Nistelrooy and van Bommel are just not honest enough players."

De Telegraaf meanwhile appeared to criticise the two players in question.

The newspaper said they timed their refusal to join up with the

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Tough ties for Brits

AFP, Paris



Tottenham and Newcastle were handed no favours when they were drawn in potentially tough groups for the UEFA Cup's next round on Tuesday.

Holders Sevilla were meanwhile given a boost in their bid to defend last season's UEFA Cup crown.

The on-form Spaniards, who earlier this season beat Champions League winners Barcelona to lift the European Super Cup, were drawn with Dutch side Alkmaar, Czech side Slovan Liberec, Swiss side Grasshopper and Sporting Braga of Portugal.

Tottenham, who this season have been struggling to produce their form of last season, have been drawn in group B with Bayer Leverkusen, Bruges, Besiktas and Dynamo Bucharest.

Newcastle face perhaps a tougher test in their group campaign, which runs from October 19 till December 14 and from which the top three in each group go through to the next round of 32 teams along with eight third-place finishers from the Champions League groups.

The Magpies will face Spanish outfit Celta Vigo, Italian side Palermo, Fenerbahce of Turkey and German side Frankfurt.

Spurs coach Martin Jol said he had been prepared for a tough draw.

"It is a difficult one because we were in the last pot so it was always going to be a hard group," he said.

"Normally the top three teams would be big favourites, but there are no weaker teams in our group and we will not be viewed as such by the other clubs."

"It will be an exciting journey for us. Leverkusen is a club with a great history. (Spurs striker) Dimitar Berbatov played there and they reached the Champions League

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UEFA CUP DRAW

- Group A: Auxerre (FRA), Rangers (SCO), Partizan Belgrade (SCG), Livorno (ITA), Maccabi Haifa (ISR)
- Group B: Bayer Leverkusen (GER), Bruges (BEL), Besiktas (TUR), Dynamo Bucarest (ROM), Tottenham (ENG)
- Group C: Sevilla (ESP/holder), Alkmaar (NED), Slovan Liberec (CZE), Grasshoppers (SUI), Sporting Braga (POR)
- Group D: Parma (ITA), Lens (FRA), Heerenveen (NED), Osasuna (ESP), Odense (DEN)
- Group E: Feyenoord (NED), Basel (SUI), Wisla Krakow (POL), Blackburn Rovers (ENG), Nancy (FRA)
- Group F: Ajax (NED), Sparta Prague (CZE), Espanyol (ESP), Austria Vienna (AUT), Zulte-Waregem (BEL)
- Group G: Panathinaikos (GRE), Paris St Germain (FRA), Rapid Bucarest (ROM), Hapoel Tel-Aviv (ISR), Mlada Boleslav (CZE)
- Group H: Newcastle (ENG), Celta Vigo (ESP), Palermo (ITA), Fenerbahce (TUR), Frankfurt (GER)

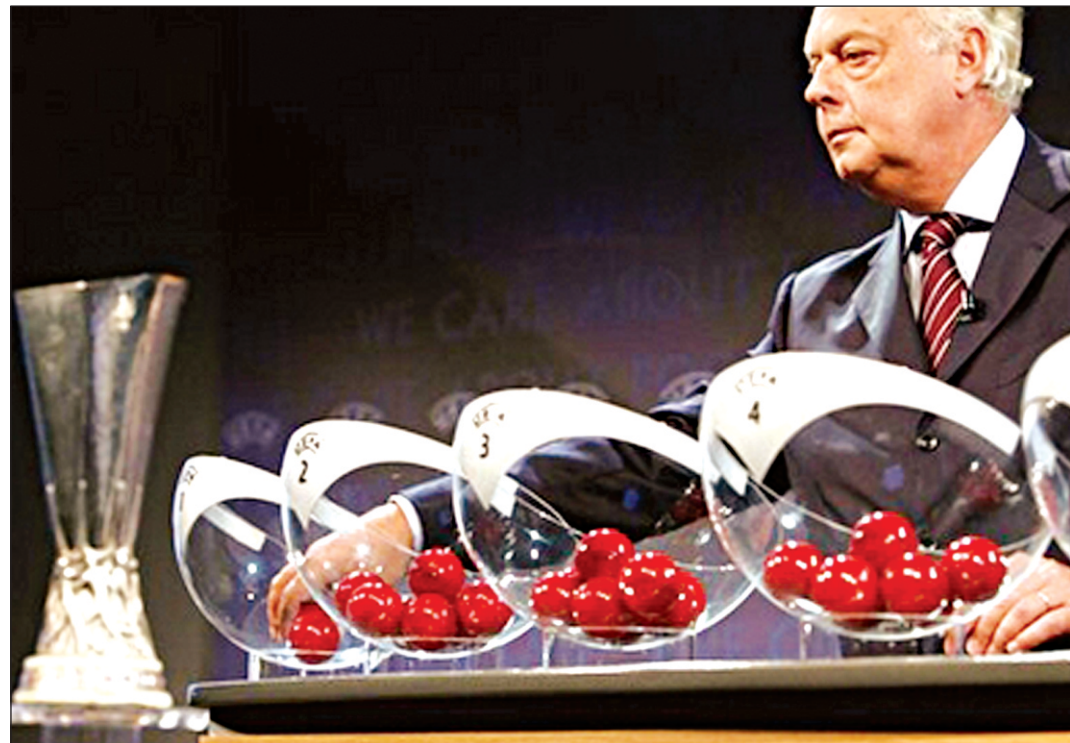


PHOTO: AFP

Roger Vanden Stock, vice-chairman of the UEFA Club Competitions Committee, draws a ball containing the name of a team during the UEFA Cup draw in Nyon on Tuesday.

'Hiddink poor man-manager'

Football

AFP, Sydney

Goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer has criticised Guus Hiddink's management skills in the Australian team set-up at this year's World Cup in Germany.

In a newly-released diary of the Socceroos' first World Cup campaign in 32 years, the Middlesbrough keeper revealed his disappointment at being dumped from the make-or-break pool game against Croatia in favour of longtime rival Zeljko Kalac.

A jittery Kalac almost cost Australia their place in the last 16 with a horrendous fumble that gifted the Croatians a 2-1 lead with 30 minutes left, only for Harry Kewell to keep the Socceroos in the tournament with a 79th-minute equaliser.

Dutchman Hiddink took on hero status in Australia for plotting the Socceroos' path to the second round, where they went out on a disputed last-minute penalty to eventual champions Italy.

But Schwarzer, although expressing his great respect for Hiddink, said he could have handled the Australian goalkeeping situation "a whole lot better."

The battle for first-choice between Schwarzer and Kalac, fired up by Hiddink's cat-and-mouse selection approach, was the biggest

talking point within the Australian team before and during the World Cup finals.

Hiddink, now the Russian national coach, kept Schwarzer and Kalac on tenterhooks before each match at the finals, and Schwarzer admitted the situation almost left him an emotional mess.

"There were times when I found it hard to cope with," Schwarzer said in "World Cup Destiny."

"I'd ask myself what had I done wrong and whether I was reading too much into certain situations, especially at training. It was uneasy because you were always looking over your shoulder."

Schwarzer's main concerns centred on Hiddink leaving both goalkeepers guessing until hours before a match about who would be selected.

"I know I didn't see everything from Guus's perspective but I cannot deny that he is a great coach," Schwarzer said.

"I have a great respect for him. Just look at the Socceroos' record and what we achieved at the finals."

"However, he surprised me with how he approached the goalkeeping situation. I think that, in some respects, he showed a lack of man-management skills and a lack of appreciation of what players need in terms of getting ready mentally and emotionally for a big match."

"I could never understand why he would name the team just hours

before kick-off. I always believed that finding out your selection status at such short notice was far from ideal. My best performance at the finals came after he gave me 24 hours' notice about starting."

"To be fair, the situation not only hurt me, but it hurt Spider (Kalac) as well. I don't think it did us any favours at all."

Schwarzer recalls thinking during the Croatia match that Kalac was lacking match practice.

"I was doing my best to look at the match with a totally neutral perspective," Schwarzer wrote. "But it looked to me as though Spider was short of match practice. His timing and possibly his confidence were down."

"I actually felt for Spider after his mistake," he said. "Everybody makes mistakes and while this was a crucial one I couldn't blame him for wanting to play."

"However, the fact is he played very few games for his club (Inter Milan) last season and while we like to believe training can replicate match conditions, we know nothing can replace match practice."

Schwarzer is expected to be in goal when Australia take on Paraguay in Brisbane on Saturday.