



PHOTO: AFP

Lars Lagerback (C), head coach of Sweden speaks to the players at a training session on Thursday at the Rasunda Stadium near Stockholm.

Duo battle for striking berth

INTERNET, undated

Alex Del Piero and David Di Michele are competing for a spot in Italy's starting line-up for Saturday's clash with Ukraine.

Roberto Donadoni has not yet decided who to field next to Mauro Camoranesi and Luca Toni, as the Azzurri seek a victory after their stuttering start to the Euro 2008 qualifiers.

Del Piero seems to hold the advantage over Di Michele, although both players have begun the season impressively with Juventus and Palermo respectively.

The Bianconeri skipper, however, has international experience and that could prove to be decisive in a must-win match.

A defeat or even a draw may jeopardise the Azzurri's hope of qualifying for the European Championship.

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

Donadoni will field Gennaro Gattuso and Daniele De Rossi in midfield and a four-men defence, with Massimo Oddo and Gianluca Zambrotta on the flanks and Fabio Cannavaro and Marco Materazzi as centre-backs.

The Azzurri suffered a double blow during the week, when Fabio Grosso was forced to pull out with a thigh strain and Simone Perrotta was also injured during training on Wednesday.

Ukraine defeated Georgia 3-2 in their only Group B qualifier to date and Coach Oleh Blokhin may be forced to start without Andriy Shevchenko who has a high temperature and the Dynamo Kiev duo Serhiy Rebrov and Ruslan Rotan.

The match will kick-off at 20:50 local time at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome and will be officiated by Kyros Vassaras of Greece.

Spain wary of Swedish air assault

REUTERS, Madrid



Spain have been working on countering Sweden's aerial threat in the build up to Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier in Solna.

Luis Aragones's side proved they were vulnerable to Northern Ireland's dead-ball delivery and direct approach in Belfast last month when they were surprisingly beaten 3-2.

"Against Northern Ireland we suffered from their set-pieces. Many games are decided from these

types of plays so obviously we have been spending time practising them," Spain defender Juanito told a news conference on Thursday. "Sweden are a tall team and like our previous opponents are very direct. They have good wingers and good finishers."

After conceding three goals in Belfast, Aragones looks set to remodel his defence, drafting in Real Betis centre back Juanito in place of Pablo Ibanez, and Deportivo Coruna's Joan Capdevila for Antonio Lopez at left back.

He has also hinted that he will change the formation to give the side more defensive solidity, and that they will look to play more on the break.

Group F leaders Sweden are without leading striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who has refused to play after clashing with coach Lars Lagerback, but Spain are refusing to drop their guard.

"Ibrahimovic's absence is good for us but we must be careful," said Valencia forward Miguel Angel Angulo, who is set to start on the right side of midfield.

"His replacement up front will be really keen to impress his coach and thank him for being given a chance."

Spain are joint second in the group with three points from two games, three behind unbeaten leaders Sweden.

Croatia suffer Srna blow

THE GUARDIAN

Croatia's preparations for next Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier against England were dealt a severe blow yesterday when the playmaker Darijo Srna limped out of training.

The midfielder has been ruled out of Saturday's game against Andorra and will be examined by the team doctor to determine whether he should stay with the squad for Wednesday's Group E encounter. Croatian radio reported that he had suffered "a muscle rupture".

The Shakhtar Donetsk midfielder joins the forwards Ivica Olic and Milan Rapaić on the sidelines and the coach Slaven Bilic was considering calling up the uncapped Parma striker Igor Budan as a replacement.

The 24-year-old Srna is a key player for the newly appointed Bilic. He scored five goals in Croatia's successful World Cup qualifying campaign, including the decisive goals in the two 1-0 wins against main rivals Sweden, and played in all three games in Germany.

Srna, together with Olic and the former Aston Villa forward Bosko Balaban, was last month expelled from the squad after leaving the team camp to go to a nightclub before their first game in the group, a 0-0 draw against Russia, but the trio were recalled for the games against Andorra and England.

Quaresma promises Eriksson return

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica presidential candidate Carlos Alberto Quaresma has promised that if elected he will try and lure former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson back to the Portuguese giants for a third time. The Lisbon club are holding presidential elections later this month and 51-year-old businessman Quaresma wants to bring the Swede back to the Stadium of Light after previous spells from 1982 to 1984 and from 1989 to 1992.

"I am going to win and then Eriksson will be my coach. He would be returning to a place where he has some great friends," Quaresma said.

Benfica are currently managed by Fernando Santos. They are seventh in the domestic league with one point to show from their first two Champions League group matches.

Eriksson quit as England boss after the World Cup, but is still being paid by the Football Association.

He was reported to be involved in talks with the US Soccer Federation about taking the vacant post as USA coach.

UEFA delays Gibraltar decision

REUTERS, Bern

European soccer's governing body UEFA has delayed a controversial decision to grant membership to Gibraltar -- despite being ordered to do so by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

Meeting in Ljubljana on Thursday, UEFA's executive committee said it had decided to postpone plans to grant the territory provisional membership until its meeting on Dec. 7-8 "in order to examine new documents submitted shortly before the meeting."

A UEFA spokesman said later: "The Spanish FA has brought to our attention a number of documents recently discovered in their archives, and the executive committee felt there was no time to examine them before its decision today."

"And since no draws or competitions (involving Gibraltar) are taking place in that time, nobody would suffer any damage."

In July, CAS ordered UEFA's executive committee "to admit the Gibraltar Football Association to provisional membership of UEFA at its next meeting."

The court also ordered the committee to put the question of Gibraltar's application for full membership before the next meeting of the UEFA Congress, due to be held in January 2007.

UEFA had originally declined Gibraltar's request because of a rule in UEFA's statutes stating that membership could only be granted to countries recognised by the United Nations as independent states.

However CAS pointed out that this rule had only been introduced in 2001 -- two years after Gibraltar first filed its application.

Crouch keen to partner Rooney

Football

REUTERS, Manchester

Peter Crouch says he will be the perfect partner for the returning Wayne Rooney when England play Macedonia in a Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday.

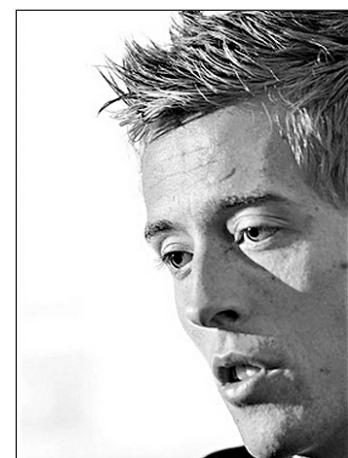
The Liverpool forward is tipped to play alongside Rooney, who is back for the Group E match following a three-match suspension for the red card he received in the World Cup quarterfinal against Portugal.

Crouch has scored 11 goals in 14 starts for England and five in three games under coach Steve McClaren.

"Every time I have played alongside Wayne I have enjoyed it because he is a creative player and that can only be good for me," Crouch told reporters on Wednesday.

"He is comfortable dropping off and wants the ball all the time. With

him doing that, I can hold a high line and get into the box and get on the end of things."



PETER CROUCH

Rooney has not scored a competitive goal for England since Euro 2004 and his form for Manchester

United this season has been below par but Crouch believes the talisman forward deserves his expected instant recall to the England side.

"He is a top, top talent. People are making a big thing about a couple of games when he hasn't been at his best," Crouch said.

"But you have to remember how young he is and it's only been a couple of games.

"When he is not scoring goals, he gives the team so much anyway, and it's only a matter of time before he scores again."

Stuart Downing, meanwhile, believes he can hang onto a place in McClaren's team when Joe Cole, the player he has replaced on the left wing, returns from injury.

"I back myself and I'm confident in my own ability to fight for a place with Joe Cole or anyone else," Downing said.

Neville tipped for ton

REUTERS, Manchester



Rio Ferdinand has tipped his fellow Manchester United defender Gary Neville to become only the fifth England

player to win 100 caps.

Neville, who should earn his 83rd cap in Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier against Macedonia, could follow Peter Shilton (125), Bobby Moore (108), Bobby Charlton (106) and Billy Wright (105) in reaching the milestone in about two years' time.

"He has to be special to play in as many games as he has at the level he has," Ferdinand told reporters.

"There is no-one better in that position at the moment. I believe he can get 100 caps."

Neville, who missed England's last two qualifiers in Group E because of injury, is the elder statesman of the England squad at 31, having played in three European championships and two World Cups.

"He's always got something to

say and if he's got a problem with something he will always speak up," Ferdinand said.

"That's vital for a squad. You can always count on him. He's a fantastic footballer."

On Saturday, Ferdinand is looking forward to seeing another United team mate, Wayne Rooney, and Peter Crouch start their first match together as England strike partners.

"On paper that could be fantastic," he said. "Wayne could come off him and drop in. Crouchy could stay up there at the top of the pitch."

"If we get the ball in the box there's not many better finishers around at the moment than Crouchy -- especially in an England shirt."

Rooney, who is battling a loss of form after club and country suspensions, has been less fortunate this season.

"He's had an interrupted season but people make more of a meal of it because it's Wayne Rooney," Ferdinand said. "He brings a lot more to the team than just goals."

"He can set up scoring opportunities and his workrate is up there with the best of them. If he's not scoring goals there are still not

many defenders who like playing against him."

Paul Robinson clearly believes he has something to prove with England in the years ahead as a goalkeeper.

"I don't think I am one of the world's best, but I certainly aim to become one of the game's best. That will come in time with more games and experience," Robinson told reporters.

Looking back to this year's games, including their penalty shootout defeat by Portugal at the World Cup, he said: "My recent record is very good for England."

"It's five clean sheets in a row and, if you take out the penalties against Portugal, I have conceded one goal in nine games... I have made good progress.

"Having the World Cup is an experience and you get stronger and better from those experiences."

Chelsea hit back at Calderon

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea on Thursday hit back at claims by Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon that the Blues spending power was over-inflating the transfer market for other European clubs.

Calderon also expressed his concern at Chelsea's huge financial losses since Russian billionaire owner Roman Abramovich arrived.

The London-outfit responded by accusing Real of not being completely transparent in their own accounts.

"I think it's a problem -- it's putting the prices very high," Calderon told BBC Radio Five Live.

"He is paying a lot of money for players, but we have to compete with it."

"In Abramovich's case, he admitted to having lost 220million euros last season. For me, it's very dangerous."

Calderon also questioned the Russian's commitment to the club.

"You don't know how long those people are going to stay in soccer," he said.

"If somebody decides to leave, it's going to be a problem."

Chelsea director of communi-

cations Simon Greenberg insisted they were more than capable of covering their losses and reiterated Abramovich's commitment to the club.

"I would not doubt Roman Abramovich's commitment, not just to Chelsea but to football generally," said Greenberg.

"The money that's been spent has been invested into football -- the majority of it. A very small amount of his current investment went on purchasing the club."

"The rest of it has gone into football and filtered down through football."

"Although we made a substantial loss last year, there were a number of one-off payments that won't be repeated this year -- and our auditors, who are one of the leading auditing firms in the world, would never have signed off our accounts (otherwise)."

"We run ourselves as much as we can as a plc."

"We are completely transparent about our accounts -- which is something that cannot be said for many of the top European clubs including, I would say, Real Madrid."

Greenberg also insisted they were not artificially inflating prices in the transfer market.

"It's an open market. People can pay as much as they want to pay," he said.

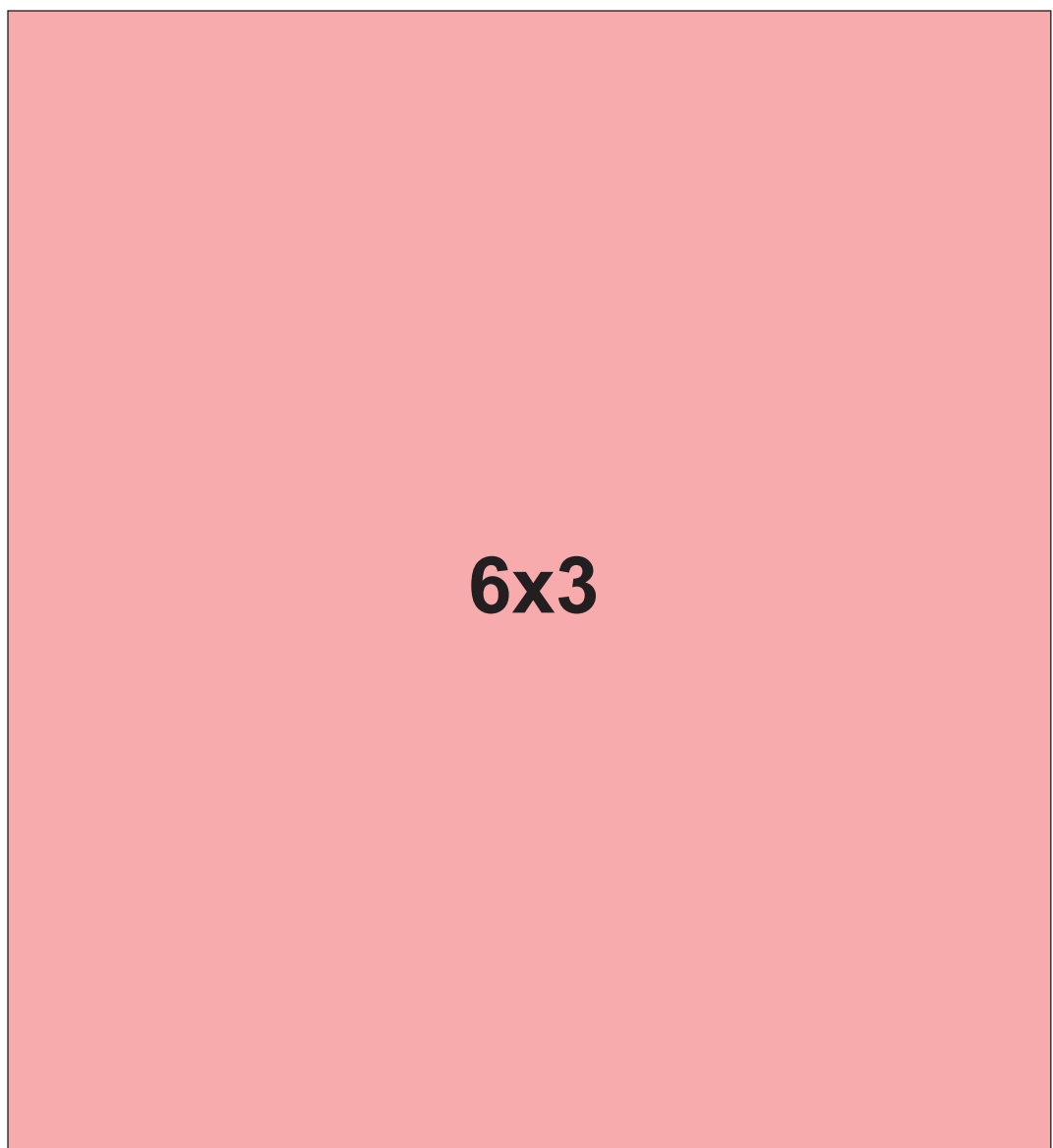
"We feel sometimes we have to pay a bit more because we are Chelsea. Clubs are not prepared to sell at a particular price because they feel that they can get more from Chelsea and therefore they play one off against another."

Greenberg also claimed that other European clubs sometimes create the false impression Chelsea are interested in one of their players to drive up his price.

He said: "We have been 'involved' in a number of transfers because clubs have put in Chelsea's name saying Chelsea are bidding -- and we've got nothing to do with that."

"They try to drive the price up that way."

"But I don't think we artificially inflate any prices at all. We pay what we believe is a fair price."

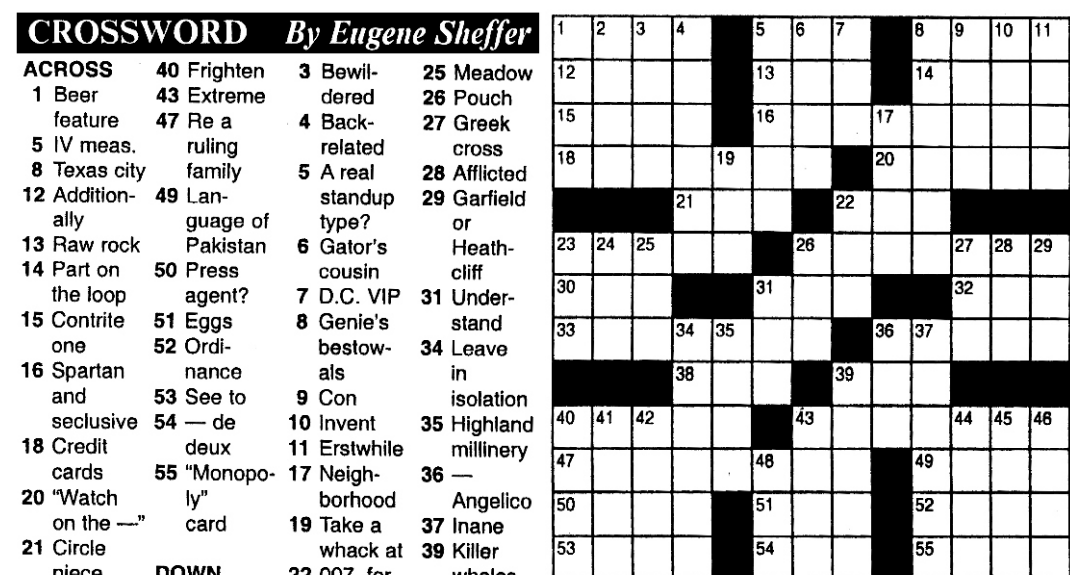


CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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|--|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| ACROSS | 40 Frighten | 3 Bewildered | 25 Meadow |
| 1 Beer | 43 Extreme | 4 Back-related | 26 Pouch |
| feature | 47 Re a | 5 A real type? | 27 Greek cross |
| 5 IV meas. | ruling family | 6 Gator's cousin | 28 Afflicted |
| 8 Texas city | 49 Language of | 7 D.C. VIP | 29 Garfield or Heath-cliff |
| 12 Addition- | Pakistan | 8 Genie's bestow-als | 31 Under-stand |
| ally | 50 Press agent? | 9 Con | 34 Leave in |
| 13 Raw rock | 51 Eggs | 10 Invent | isolation |
| 14 Part on the loop | 52 Ordinance | 11 Erstwhile | 35 Highland millinery |
| 50 Press agent? | 53 See to seclusive | 12 Neigh- | 36 -- |
| 15 Contribute one | 54 -- de | 13 borhood | Angelico |
| 51 Eggs | 55 "Monopoly" | 14 Take a whack at | 37 Inane |
| 52 Ordinance | card | 15 007, for instance | 39 Killer whales |
| 16 Spartan and | 20 "Watch on the ---" | 22 Fawn's mom | 40 Mine entrance |
| 53 See to seclusive | 21 Circle piece | 23 Poking month | 41 - |
| 54 -- de | 22 Witness | 24 Poking month | Down's kin |
| 18 Credit cards | 23 Waste time | Solution time: 21 mins. | 42 In due time |
| 55 "Monopoly" | 26 Fitful | SPUD FLOW FRET | 43 Prima donna |
| 17 Neigh- | 30 Use 18-Across | HERO ORA LEAR | 44 Verifiable |
| borhood | 31 Rotation duration | ORAL PORPOISE | 45 "Spamalot" creator |
| 19 Take a whack at | 32 Carte lead-in | PULLUP PURGES | Eric |
| whack at whales | 33 Stretchy | AREA PAN | 46 Prompted |
| 39 Killer whales | 36 Crust crack | PORRIDGE LIMA | 48 Upper surface |
| 40 Mine entrance | 38 Play-ground game | ABE SUIERS NOW | |
| 41 - | 39 Sphere | DISH PORTUGAL | |
| Down's kin | | COOP PLAYS | |
| JHDWQHC SZ QSPLE R SBH | | UNUSE NUTTER | |
| BZQOESPFBHYPQ QEXOFL | | PORTRAIT RUB | |
| SZZ UZZC DZJ YPJ CQ | | ONCE TILL ENID | |
| Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF SALVE FAILS TO HAVE AN EFFECT ON A WOUND, I WOULD CALL THAT OINTMENT DISAPPOINTMENT. | | NEED SKY RATS | |
| Today's Cryptquip Clue: Z equals O | | | |

PHOTO: INTERNET

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino (R) and others hoist the World Cup Trophy at a restaurant at a Boston neighbourhood on Wednesday, as part of its trip round the USA.



CRYPTOQUIP S B H B P W U B S L X P R JHDWQHC SZ QSPLE R SBH BZQOESPFBHYPQ QEXOFL

Today's Cryptquip Clue: Z equals O

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.