

Gerrard believes in Rooney

Steven Gerrard is backing Wayne Rooney to bounce back from his disappointing international return against Macedonia by proving his worth against Croatia on Wednesday.

Manchester United forward Rooney, making his first international appearance since being sent off against Portugal at the World Cup, was substituted on 74 minutes after an unimpressive performance during the drab 0-0 at Old Trafford on Saturday.

But Gerrard, suspended for the now crucial Group E game against Croatia after picking up his second yellow card of the qualifying campaign against the Macedonians, insists that Rooney is more than capable of silencing his doubters in Zagreb.

Gerrard said: "Wayne can handle all the pressure and he will come through this no problem. He was our best player in training all week and he is the best player in the country bar none."

"I would not be surprised if he goes to Croatia and wins the game on his own for the country. That's how good Wayne is."

Rooney's partnership with Liverpool hitman Peter Crouch failed to worry the well-organised Macedonia defence, but Crouch insisted the pair will come good if given time to work on their double act.



Swedish players celebrate the first goal against Spain during their Euro2008 qualifying match in Solna on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

More pain for Spain

AFP, Stockholm



Sweden maintained their perfect Euro 2008 qualifying campaign with a 2-0 win over Spain which will heap further pressure on their under-fire coach Luis Aragones.

Goals from Johan Elmander and Marcus Allback handed the hosts their third win in as many games, following earlier wins against Latvia and Liechtenstein, and left them top of group F.

It also amply hit back at critics who said that a string of injuries, no-shows and disputes between players and coach Lars Lagerbeck would spell disaster on the field.

Spain however will be going back to the drawing board, their latest setback coming hot on the heels of their shock 3-2 defeat to Northern Ireland last month.

Aragones will be under pressure, but admitted that any decision concerning his future is not in his hands.

"My future doesn't depend on me, it's up to the federation -- and perhaps one or two journalists," said the Spaniard.

Aragones, who tried but failed to quit his coaching job after Spain were eliminated at the last 16 stage of the World Cup, left Raul out -- a first in ten years for the respected Real Madrid striker.

In retrospect Aragones might be rueing that decision after the normally in-form strike partnership of David Villa and Fernando Torres, both of whom scored against the northern Irish, failed to inspire on the night.

Elmander fired Sweden into an early lead after being picked out by Allback, sending the ball past Iker Casillas from the edge of the area.

Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos almost levelled but pulled his effort wide, before Casillas saved well from Niclas Alexandersson.

Elmander was unlucky not to double the home side's advantage just before the half-hour when his drive from distance came back off the crossbar.

Sweden's Egyptian-born stand-

in keeper Rami Shaaban was not given a great deal to do until the 38th minute when he saved an attempt from Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas.

Arsenal midfielder Freddie Ljungberg limped off early in the second half and was replaced by Christian Wilhelmsson as neither team managed to take hold of the match.

Allback threatened just before the hour mark but his effort drifted wide.

Spain, looking more and more desperate, saw Luis Garcia blasted over from 20 metres and his effort was followed by those of Xavi Hernandez and Carles Puyol, whose goalbound header was turned away.

Sweden then guaranteed all three points when Wilhelmsson found Allback and the 33-year-old beat Casillas from inside the area with eight minutes remaining.

Sweden will look for more of the same against Iceland on Wednesday while Spain will not play again until Denmark visit in March.

Italian media sigh of relief

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's media breathed a sigh of relief after the world champions beat Ukraine 2-0 in a Euro 2008 qualifier to notch up their first victory since Roberto Donadoni took over as coach.

Saturday's win, which followed a defeat to Croatia in a friendly in August then a 1-1 draw with Lithuania and a 3-1 loss to France in their opening two Group B matches, put them back on track in their Euro 2008 qualifying campaign.

"Welcome back Italy," read the headline on the front of Corriere dello Sport on Sunday.

La Gazzetta dello Sport noted the Azzurri's shaky performance, but ran a front-page editorial entitled "Winning again was the only thing that counted".

Italy were grateful to an inspired performance from keeper Gianluigi Buffon who made a string of saves to ensure the first clean sheet of Donadoni's tenure before a 71st-minute penalty by Massimo Oddo broke the deadlock.

"I just did what I had to. We knew it was going to be tough," Buffon was quoted as saying in Gazzetta dello Sport.

"It was a difficult match and if we hadn't won this time, it would have been a very negative result."

Luca Toni also gave an impressive performance in his first international since the World Cup final in July.

The Fiorentina striker scored twice in the 3-0 win over Ukraine in the World Cup quarterfinals and was again on target on Saturday, grabbing Italy's second goal with a dipping shot from outside the area.

"It's obviously a team that brings me luck," he said.

"It wasn't easy to find space, but in the end we did it. I was pleased for Donadoni, who has been going through a tough period, like all of us."

Aragones defiant despite defeat

INTERNET, undated

Luis Aragones has insisted he wishes to continue as Spain coach despite a disastrous start to the Euro 2008 qualifying campaign. He saw his side lose 2-0 to Sweden last night, less than a month after a shock 3-2 loss away in Northern Ireland.

They now languish fifth in group F, with just three points from their opening three matches, though the 68-year-old rejected any talk of a possible resignation.

"I feel strong enough to carry on," he told reporters. "I'm not going to make any move to resign. Whether I continue or not will depend on the Federation and the press."

"When you lose two important games things are obviously difficult, but I've spent a long time in football and dealt with situations like this before."

Spain's next qualifying fixture is at home to Denmark next March.

Easy win for Germany

AFP, Rostock

Germany warmed up for Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier against Slovakia with a 2-0 friendly win over Georgia here on Saturday although the win was marred by the sending-off of Lukas Podolski for violent conduct.

A long-range shot from Bastian Schweinsteiger on 24 minutes and a 67th minute goal from captain Michael Ballack secured victory for Germany who now travel to Bratislava with confidence.

"We played with passion and lots of effort but the team had a lot of changes tonight and we made mistakes," said Germany coach Joachim Loew.

"But the win is important and we now go into the Slovakia match full of confidence."

Bayern Munich marksman Podolski was sent off on 48 minutes for retaliating after he was fouled but will not be suspended for the Slovakia game as this match was a friendly.

Loew rested key players such as World Cup golden boot hero Miroslav Klose, Philipp Lahm, Bernd Schneider and Torsten Frings with the trip to Bratislava in mind.

Werder Bremen defender Clemens Fritz and SV Hamburg midfielder Piotr Trochowski both made their debuts in the starting line-up as Loew tested out some fresh faces.

But it was the old guard Schweinsteiger and Ballack who made the difference.

Germany have started their Euro 2008 qualifying campaign with a perfect two wins -- a 1-0 victory over the Republic of Ireland and a 13-0 annihilation of San Marino -- but should beware of Slovakia who thrashed Wales 5-1 on Saturday.

Donadoni praises Azzurri spirit

AFP, Rome



Italy coach Roberto Donadoni heaped praise on his players for their sheer determination in Saturday's 2-0 victory here against Ukraine

which gave their Euro 2008 qualification a major boost.

The pressure was on the world champions after taking just one point from their first two Group B matches against Lithuania and France.

But they rose to the challenge with a precious win thanks to two late goals, from Massimo Oddo -- a coolly converted penalty -- and Luca Toni.

Donadoni was delighted with the way his players stuck to their task against the team they beat in the World Cup quarterfinals.

"It was the kind of match we were expecting against a difficult and well

organised side and we passed the test," he said after his first win since taking over from Marcello Lippi as coach shortly after the World Cup final.

"We weren't always brilliant, but we never stopped trying and fought for every ball."

"Ukraine were dangerous, but all of their efforts were from distance and didn't get near our goal. The players deserve a lot of credit for that."

Italy's victory -- which tasted even sweeter following World Cup final opponents France's shock defeat to Scotland -- left them with four points, five adrift of leaders Scotland. France have six points from their three matches played.

Asked if he was surprised by France's defeat, Donadoni replied: "That just goes to show how difficult this group is and that there are no easy matches."

Toni was relieved to see Italy put their qualification hopes back on track. "We desperately needed these

three points," he said.

"It was tough as Ukraine battled hard, but I thought we deserved it."

Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin said his team sorely felt the loss of star striker Andrei Shevchenko to a virus, but admitted Italy deserved the points.

"Considering the problems we had before the match, I thought we played really well," he said.

"We showed that we are not negative, that we can play with an attacking style. Both teams had chances, but overall Italy deserved the win. I wasn't sure about the penalty, though."

Blokhin insisted Ukraine could still claim one of the two qualifying places up for grabs in the group.

"It's still wide open, but we will have to fight in every match," he said.

Brazil outplay Al-Kuwait

Football

AFP, Kuwait City

Brazil stars rewarded some 20,000 spectators with a majestic display Saturday to defeat Kuwait's league champions Al-Kuwait Sports Club 4-0 in a friendly international.

Playing for the first time in this tiny oil-rich Gulf state, the five-time world champions, though missing renowned stars like Ronaldo and Adriano, found no difficulty in dominating the game from the start to the finish.

Real Betis striker, Rafael Sobis, among the new stars added by coach Dunga, opened the scoring in the 17th minute with a powerful shot from just inside the box after receiving a perfect pass from Robinho.

Real Madrid striker Robinho

added the second goal in the 36th minute with a stunning solo effort, netting over goalkeeper Khaled al-Fadli after skilfully getting past three defenders.

Robinho remained the main threat on the inexperienced Al-Kuwait defenders until he was substituted after 50 minutes.

The world's player of the year midfielder Ronaldinho entertained the crowds with some perfect passes before he was substituted at the interval.

The Brazilians lost no time into the second half in adding to their tally when Sobis set substitute midfielder Daniel Carvalho clear into the penalty area with only goalkeeper to beat in the 53rd minute.

AC Milan star Kaka, on as a substitute, scored the fourth goal in the 78th minute in an impressive

solo effort when he went past three defenders and shot from the penalty spot.

The Brazilians, who were cheered by an enthusiastic crowd, missed several easy chances to increase the tally.

Al-Kuwait Club came close to scoring twice, both from free-kicks with the last one hitting the bar in injury time.

Brazilian legend Pele watched the game which was held to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Al-Kuwait Club.

The Brazilian squad was given a hero's welcome on their arrival Friday at Kuwait International Airport as hundreds of football fans gathered to receive them.

Many of them followed the players' motorcade to their seaside hotel, some 20km from the airport.

Ronaldo takes down Azerbaijan

REUTERS, Oporto

Winger Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Portugal beat Azerbaijan 3-0 in their Euro 2008 Group A qualifier on Saturday.

It was Portugal's first win in two qualifiers following a 1-1 draw in Finland last month. They meet Poland away on Wednesday.

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari told



CRISTIANO RONALDO

RTP television he had not expected the game to be easy, adding "we had to shoot, to experiment, to shoot from outside the area."

"We have a team which knows the routine, which has played together for a long time. Time is helping us," Scolari said.

Ronaldo opened the scoring after 25 minutes when he gave goalkeeper Farhad Veliyev no chance with a shot inside the box from a pass by playmaker Deco.

Defender Ricardo Carvalho doubled the lead when he shot home after Ronaldo's free-kick had been parried by Veliyev after half an hour.

The Manchester United player scored his second and Portugal's third after 63 minutes when he headed in a cross from the right by Simao Sabrosa.

Looking ahead to Wednesday, Ronaldo said: "We have a very difficult game against Poland, I hope we will be in form."

In the last minute, substitute Vagif Javadov had a good chance to score a consolation goal but his shot was saved by goalkeeper Ricardo Pereira.

Little English, Superb Scots

AFP, London



British newspapers on Sunday slammed the toothless draw England eeked out against

Macedonia but hailed Scotland's against-all-odds defeat of World Cup runners-up France.

In qualifiers for Euro 2008 on Saturday, England could only struggle to a 0-0 draw against the east Europeans while Celtic defender Gary Caldwell scored the only goal of the game to seal a 1-0 win for Scotland.

The Sunday Telegraph lambasted the performance put in by Steve McClaren's men, notably his strikers. "England lose plot," read its headline. "Honeymoon over as England draw blank."

"After all the talk of a new era, of new beginnings, this was a deeply disappointing performance against one of the genuine minnows of world football," the newspaper said.

Macedonia are ranked 47 places behind England in the FIFA world rankings.

"That old chestnut about there being no easy games in international football anymore just will not wash," it said, picking out Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard as again underperforming for an England team bereft of attacking ideas.

"Misfiring England flatter to deceive," headlined The Observer, labelling parts of the team's stuttering performance as "park football at its finest".

"A draw was a fair result, the England performance again worryingly uneven," it said.

The Sunday Times labelled the England team as "wasteful" and "lacklustre" and the game in general

as possessing "very little shine or quality".

It also predicted a trying time in Wednesday's tie against Croatia, who have not lost an international on home soil in 12 years as an independent country.

On the other hand, it was "Scotland with the va-va-voom", Observer columnist Amy Lawrence said in reference to a well-known expression coined by France striker Thierry Henry in adverts for a car.

"At half time a result of such spectacular proportions looked impossible.

"Such is Scotland's optimism, there wasn't so much nerves as the time ebbed away as excitement. The hysterical crowd sensed they were on the verge of another historic triumph at France's expense."

Domenech blames ball boys

AFP, Glasgow



French manager Raymond Domenech launched an astonishing attack on Scottish ball boys -- blaming them for returning

the ball too slowly during his side's 1-0 defeat at Hampden.

Though France controlled the vast majority of Saturday's Euro 2008 Group B qualifier, Scotland scored the only goal of the game in the 67th minute through Gary Caldwell.

However, at the end of the match, Domenech accused the Scottish ball boys of deliberately slowing the tempo of the game.

He said: "Before the game I knew what the Scottish fans and team were a nation who believe in fair play."

known for their fair play." Scotland manager Walter Smith laughed off Domenech's claims.

He said: "It was brilliant that wasn't it. Seriously I think that is something that would happen in any country in the world."

"For Scotland it's nice to be in the position where the ball boys don't need to get the ball back quickly."

Domenech was also disappointed with his players' performance during the game and felt they should have taken advantage of Scotland's weaknesses better.

However, the French manager also paid tribute to Smith's side and warned they could cause further upsets in Group B which also includes world champions Italy.

He said: "Scotland made a few loose passes and gave us a few balls but we were not fast enough to exploit the amount of possession we had."

"I knew before the game that this would be a difficult game and I tried to warn the players. Scotland will be a big threat to the other teams in this group."



Germany captain Michael Ballack (L) high-fives with fellow midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger after scoring against Georgia during their friendly match in Rostock on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Lays down the lawn

5 Sprite

8 Poker holding

12 Grand wire measure

14 2.54 centimeters

15 Lends a hand

16 Ottoman governor

17 Deck

18 Knitted footwear

20 Drive the getaway car

22 Can painter

26 Clark's traveling companion

29 Motorists' org.

30 Prior night

31 Chester

32 Your

33 Fed, e.g.

34 Scratch villain

35 Greet the villain

36 Rings out

37 "60 Minutes"

40 Wander

41 Top

45 Trudge

47 Last (Abbr.)

49 Paradise

50 One of Hamlet's choices

51 Barracks bed

52 Patronize the library

53 Skating leap

54 Dinner for Dobbin Without

55 Sheepish remark

DOWN

1 Impale

2 Home of Oberlin

3 Old fogy

4 Keep up

5 Stick in the mud?

6 Commit perjury

7 Loosely flowing

8 Cheap skate

9 Bane

10 Slick

11 Plato's P

19 Type units

21 Sheepish remark

23 Web engine

24 Elliptical

25 Fisheye, for one

26 Tibetan monk

27 Verve

28 Clothing

32 Excess

33 Old Faithful et al.

35 Support system?

36 Energy

38 Mountain air?

39 Dalt

42 Notion

43 Jerry's longtime partner

44 Tackles' team-mates

45 Harper Valley grp.

46 Bagel topping

48 Mauna

Solution time: 25 mins.

B	S	A	F	A	B
S	O	O	T	K	I
S	T	R	A	I	G
K	E	E	P	O	N
I	T	S	R	A	T
E	S	P	I	R	E
K	N	O	T	S	T
L	O	N	C	O	A
L	O	N	S	P	A
D	E	B	I	T	A
A	L	P	A	G	A
Y	O	K	E	L	F
N	E	D	F	E	T

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
12					13			14			
15					16			17			
18				19			20	21			
				22		23			24	25	
26	27	28			29			30			
31					32			33			
34					35			36			
37					38			39			
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45	46				47	48		49			
50						51		52			
53						54		55			

CRYPTOQUIP

A P T Q R Q Z O A X H G K K Y T B F O

G X A T W B D L B Q F Z R Y L H D

H D L A K , B L V Y A B . A B ' X

O G G K X P Q K B D Y R L X V A T W .

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: AS A SEVERE PUNISHMENT, I SUPPOSE AN EVIL PHOTOGRAPHER MAY GIVE SOMEONE FORTY FLASHES.

Today's Cryptiquip Clue: B equals T

The Cryptiquip 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.