

Ray of hope for Becks

AFP, London

David Beckham should not rule out being recalled by Steve McClaren, according to one of the England coach's advisors.

Real Madrid midfielder Beckham was dropped by McClaren as soon as he replaced Sven Goran Eriksson as national team boss in August.

The former Manchester United star had resigned as England captain in the aftermath of his country's World Cup quarterfinal defeat against Portugal, but he believed he would still be a member of McClaren's squad this season.

However McClaren has yet to call up Beckham for any of the Euro 2008 qualifiers and the player recently admitted he thought his international career was over.

Beckham was absent again as England lost 2-0 in Croatia on Wednesday, but Max Clifford, an adviser to McClaren's representatives Key Sports, believes the coach may change his mind in the future.

Clifford told BBC Radio Five Live: "If he's in tremendous form, the chance presents itself and it's best for England, that's all Steve's interested in."

"Steve McClaren is not too proud to say 'look, David Beckham is playing particularly well at the moment.'"

"Personally I don't think if Beckham had played yesterday it would have made a blind bit of difference, but I'm sure a lot of journalists will say that."

"Because, no matter what anyone does from a PR perspective, if McClaren is winning, he's popular, if he's losing, he's dead."

Anton Ferdinand arrested

AFP, London

West Ham defender Anton Ferdinand, the younger brother of England international Rio Ferdinand, has been arrested after an alleged assault outside a nightclub.

The 21-year-old, who has also played for the England under-21 team, was formally arrested when he attended an east London police station on Thursday, BBC reported.

He was held on suspicion of assault following a disturbance outside a nightclub in Essex early on October 2, police said, adding that the footballer was bailed until next month.

Donadoni denies Del Piero rift

INTERNET, Undated

Italy boss Roberto Donadoni insists the decision to exclude Alex Del Piero from the Georgia match was purely tactical.

The Juventus captain was not even handed a place on the bench for Wednesday's 3-1 win which fuelled speculation of a rift between the two men.

"I chose to leave Alex out for tactical reasons and for the bench I chose players who could complement one another in terms of the options they could offer," said Donadoni.

"I respect Del Piero as he is a model professional and I can imagine he felt badly, but he will have other opportunities in the future. I am sure we will depend on him."

"No one in the national team has an assured spot in the starting line-up, this is the motto of my Italy and it's the same for everyone."

"However, I know that when the excluded player has an important name like Del Piero, people will go crazy," he added.

His predecessor Marcello Lippi is sure that the Azzurri can do well in the remaining qualifying matches that lie ahead.

"This group is still there to be won and I'm convinced that they will succeed," said the Viareggio.

"As for Del Piero, it is quite normal that he didn't enjoy being left out. He is an extraordinary player, for his behaviour and attitude, a person who is always positive for the team."

"Obviously I wish he plays as much as possible, but I won't talk about the decisions taken by others."

Libya coach sacked

AFP, Tripoli

Libya coach Mohsen Saleh has been sacked following poor results in the two opening qualifying games for the 2008 African Nations Cup.

The Egyptian, named as coach in April, will be replaced by Abu Baker Bamy, a Libyan.

"I wanted to take Libyan football forward but I couldn't do anything because here they want quick results," lamented Saleh.

Libya lie last in the African Nations Cup qualifying Group 10 with just two points after a 1-0 defeat to Ethiopia and 1-1 draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo.



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

Zidane on Fifpro shortlist

Football

REUTERS, London

Former France playmaker Zinedine Zidane, sent off in the World Cup final in Berlin, was named on a 30-man shortlist on Thursday for FIFA's World Player of the Year award.

Zidane retired from soccer after France lost to Italy in the final on July 9, his career seemingly ending in disgrace following his head-but on defender Marco Materazzi 10 minutes before the end of extra time.

The incident ensured he missed the penalty shootout that decided the match in Italy's favour.

Zidane, Barcelona's Brazilian playmaker Ronaldinho and Inter Milan's Portuguese midfielder Luis

Figo are the only men on the shortlist to have previously won the FIFA award.

Ronaldinho is bidding to lift the trophy for the third year in a row.

Zidane has already landed the honour three times, as a Juventus player in 1998 and 2000 and with Real Madrid in 2003. Figo won the award in 2001 during his time with Real Madrid.

Premier League champions Chelsea are the most represented club with six players on the shortlist: England's Frank Lampard, Petr Cech of Czech Republic, Ghana's Michael Essien, Didier Drogba of Ivory Coast, Germany's Michael Ballack and Ukrainian Andriy Shevchenko.

Also on the list are Brazilians Adriano and Kaka along with

Miroslav Klose, Jens Lehmann and Philipp Lahm of Germany.

World champions Italy are represented by Gianluigi Buffon, Fabio Cannavaro, Gennaro Gattuso, Alessandro Nesta and Andrea Pirlo. The other French players on the shortlist apart from Zidane are Lilian Thuram, Patrick Vieira, Franck Ribery and Thierry Henry.

Portugal pair Cristiano Ronaldo and Deco are also among the candidates for the award, as is Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, England pair Steven Gerrard and Wayne Rooney, Argentina playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme and Czech midfielder Tomas Rosicky.

The winner will be announced in Zurich on Dec. 18.

Rooney in bust-up

AFP, London

England striker Wayne Rooney was involved in a row with a supporter after his side's Euro 2008 qualifying defeat in Croatia, it was revealed on Thursday.

Rooney, 20, was the target of an angry England fan who abused the Manchester United star as he boarded the team coach at the Maksimir stadium in Zagreb on Wednesday.

The fan's criticism provoked a reaction from Rooney, who is alleged to have responded in an aggressive manner.

Rooney's spokesman confirmed the incident had taken place but insisted the former Everton player had been under extreme provocation.

The spokesman said: "Any gesture Wayne may have made was directed to one, and only one, particular England fan, whose behaviour towards him appalled the other England players who saw it and horrified the rest of the England fans."

"Wayne has total respect for England fans. He accepts and understands their disappointment at last night's result."

The clash is the latest blow for Rooney, who has been in poor form for club and country this season and was again below his best as Steve McClaren's team slumped to a 2-0 defeat in Zagreb.

He has now gone over two years since his last goal in a competitive match for England and some pundits believe he should be dropped by McClaren.

Arsenal's triple blow

AFP, London

Arsenal were hit with a triple injury-blow on Thursday when Freddie Ljungberg, Emmanuel Eboue and Julio Baptista were all ruled out for the next two games.

The trio will miss Saturday's game against Watford and the Tuesday trip to CSKA Moscow for the Champions League clash after picking up injuries.

Ljungberg (calf) and Eboue (knee) suffered theirs on international duty in midweek while Baptista hurt his hamstring in a friendly played behind-closed-doors on Tuesday.

"Unfortunately when you have so many players away you can have some bad news," said Gunners boss Arsene Wenger.

"At the moment we have three injuries. They will be out for Saturday and Tuesday for sure."

"Freddie Ljungberg has a calf injury. Emmanuel Eboue has an injury to his medial knee ligaments. He will be out for three to four weeks. We have also lost Julio Baptista in training with a hamstring injury. He will be out for a while as well."

Arrest warrant for ex-Lazio boss

AFP, Rome

Italian police have issued a warrant for the arrest of former Lazio president Giorgio Chinaglia for the attempted extortion of current club chief Claudio Lotito.

Eight other people, including four members of the main supporters club of the Serie A club, were arrested Friday for suspected market rigging and extortion of Lotito in a bid to get to him to sell the club, police added.

Chinaglia, a former Lazio striker who starred for the Rome-based club in the 1970s and later became its president, is currently outside Italy.

The 59-year-old Chinaglia helped Lazio to their first Italian league title in 1974.

Police said Chinaglia was suspected of being a middleman for a Hungarian financial consortium interested in buying into Lazio, one of only three Italian clubs floated on the stock market. A Hungarian citizen was one of those arrested.

Chinaglia and his accomplices, added police, were also alleged to have publicised financial information about the club in an attempt to lower the share price.

He has also been the target of another investigation since March by Naples anti-mafia prosecutors who have suspected him of using money from the mafia for the purchase of Lazio shares.

Lotito made a formal complaint this year after receiving threats which he claimed were intended to put pressure on him to sell the club.

Lotito himself has also been handed a two-and-a-half year ban by Italian sporting authorities for his role in the summer's match-fixing scandal though the suspension has yet to be activated.

England flops await axe

Football

AFP, London

Under-fire England boss Steve McClaren said he will not be afraid to make widespread changes to his side in an effort to cure the ills exposed in the 2-0 defeat to Croatia.

England's demoralising performance in Zagreb, which put a dent in their Euro 2008 qualifying campaign, has put the coach under pressure with serious questions being asked over his tactics.

There are five months before the qualifying competition resumes in 2007 with two friendly matches pencilled in before the testing journey to Israel in March.

Holland are lined up in Amsterdam, next month, and England will arrange another friendly at home in February.

"With my coaches, I have to find out the reasons why we lost and put them right," said McClaren.

"We will use the two friendlies effectively and maybe our approach

will be different in some respects. The personnel will maybe have to be different."

England must take big strides forward if they are to finish in one of the two qualification places at the top of Group E.

They are already off the pace, after dropping five points from their last two games, and face daunting trips to both Israel and Russia next year.

Coming just four months after a disappointing World Cup campaign, Saturday's draw at home to Macedonia and defeat in Croatia have left England followers feeling flat.

However, McClaren remains defiant.

"I think we can become a side which achieves things," said the coach.

"We have to use the friendlies and really get into individuals and the squad, get into what wins and what will win, so that when we get to the qualification games in five months, the approach is different."

"We have learned from all the experiences in the last four games and will make sure we are going in the right direction."

Former skipper David Beckham looks unlikely to earn a recall but Kevin Nolan and Jermaine Pennant are two players who may come into McClaren's reckoning -- the same goes for Aston Villa's Gareth Barry.

McClaren said: "You have to look at personnel. You have to get the right people on the bus going in the same direction and that's staff and players."

"We have to look at the young talent coming through and there's a lot of it."

"There are players in the Under-21s knocking on the door and we will be looking at them very, very closely."

"Getting them as a team is the biggest thing. We talked about playing as a cohesive team and we haven't achieved that yet."

Palermo talking cool

AFP, Paris



High-flying Palermo have ruled themselves out of the Italian league title race, despite their lofty position in the table.

The Sicilian club, who host newly-promoted Atalanta on Sunday, have taken 12 points from their five matches played and share top spot with 2001 champions Roma.

With Juventus relegated for match-fixing and fellow offenders AC Milan and Fiorentina weighed down by points deductions, Serie A is more open than ever before.

But Palermo defender Andrea Barzagli has played down suggestions that his team -- bankrolled by millionaire businessman Maurizio Zamparini -- can win the Scudetto.

"In all frankness the title is not our target and it makes no sense to talk about it," said the 25-year-old Italy international.

"Zamparini wants us to get into the top four and secure a Champions League place and we will do everything we can to make him happy."

"We are capable of finishing in the top four and anything else would

be a bonus.

"Everybody sees Inter Milan as title favourites and the pressure is all on them, while no one cares about us and that works in our favour."

"We couldn't have asked for a better start, and I believe we deserve top spot right now."

Roma, whose one loss this season came against Inter, visit Reggina.

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti is equally cautious about his team's Scudetto prospects.

"We have a good, young squad and we are doing really well, but I don't know if he have that bit extra you need to win titles," he said.

Inter, a point behind Roma and Palermo, entertain Catania at the San Siro, will be desperate to make up for their disappointing 1-1 draw at Cagliari.

With everybody expecting Inter to stroll to the title even a draw is enough to prompt Italy's vulturous media to start circling above the "Nerazzurri, but their coach Roberto Mancini remains calm."

"We have come out of a month of difficult games with 11 points and that doesn't seem like a drama to me," said the 41-year-old former Italy international who played 36 times for the Azzurri.

"We're not doing badly and we are creating lots of chances. Our

league position is more than positive, especially when you consider that we have played three games away from home."

"Two of those games were against Roma and Fiorentina, which are not easy matches, but we won them both."

AC Milan, who were made to start on minus eight points but could see their handicap reduced if their appeal to the Italian Olympic Committee's Court of Arbitration is successful, play on Saturday away to Sampdoria.

Milan started off their campaign with three wins, but their momentum has been slowed by two consecutive goalless draws.

FIXTURES

(1300GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday
Sampdoria v AC Milan (1600), Siena v Messina (1830)

Sunday
Ascoli v Livorno, Empoli v Fiorentina, Inter Milan v Catania, Lazio v Cagliari (1830), Palermo v Atalanta, Parma v Udinese, Reggina v Roma, Torino v Chievo

Tricky tie for Barca

AFP, Madrid



The Spanish fixtures computer has decided to pitch the unbeaten league leaders Barcelona against third-placed Sevilla on Sunday, a game that brings together the two highest scoring teams in Primera Liga.

"I don't think you could currently find a better game between two Spanish first division sides," said Sevilla coach Juande Ramos, who could take over the job of Spanish national coach if Luis Aragonés is fired or resigns.

"I think this is going to be a very attractive match but what has made life more difficult has been the international commitments of some of my players."

"To prepare for this sort of game, it's best to have time to work together and that hasn't been possible," added Ramos, who knows what is required to defeat Barca.

It has been less than two months since the two sides last met, in the European Super Cup.

Sevilla, last season's UEFA Cup winners, confirmed their credentials as credible championship contenders by inflicting a 3-0 defeat on their domestic rivals and European champions.

"But I don't think there is any comparison between that game and this one. The Super Cup was a final and this is only league game. Although it is important, nothing yet rides on its outcome," reflected Ramos.

Nevertheless, Sevilla have won

four of their opening five games and hopes are starting to rise in the south of Spain that they can add to their one and only league title that was won back in 1946.

Much of the optimism has been based on the form of Frederic Kanoute, who has already got four goals this season.

Kanoute, who scored in the Nou Camp in last season's fixture although Barca ran out 2-1 winners, returned battered and bruised after playing for Mali last weekend.

"Fredri should be able to play but he has got some problems with an ankle, which I am not so worried about, and his knee, which is bothering him more," confirmed Ramos.

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard admitted on Wednesday that although his team may lead the league, he still has a lot on his mind.

The Dutchman will be without Samuel Eto'o, last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division, until the New Year because of injury while Ronaldinho is still far from the form that won him the World Player of the Year crown for the last two years.

"I have to be satisfied with the start of the season but, yes, things could be a lot better. However, the most important thing is the mental strength of the players," commented Rijkaard.

Sandwiched between Barcelona and Sevilla in the table is second-placed Valencia, who travel to Celta Vigo on Sunday.

Optimism is high that Valencia can continue their unbeaten streak and move into pole position should Barca falter.

"I think we are back to where we were under Rafa Benitez," said defender David Navarro, reflecting

on the two titles achieved in three years at the start of the decade by the current Liverpool coach.

"There is a great team spirit and no great egos. Everyone wants to play but you also accept that there will be rotations and in the end the team, and everybody in it, should triumph," added Navarro.

Real Madrid lie in fourth place and have a short trip across the Spanish capital to visit Getafe on Saturday night.

Former England captain David Beckham is set to start against the club from Madrid's southern suburbs after being a substitute for Real's last four games, the door being left open by an injury to Jose Antonio Reyes.

Getafe have not scored in their last three games, increasing the pressure on their coach and former Real Madrid player Bernd Schuster to get a good result against this old club.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT Kick-off unless stated)

Saturday

Getafe v Real Madrid (1800), Atletico Madrid v Recreativo Huelva (2000)

Sunday

Celta Vigo v Valencia (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Athletic Bilbao,

Levante v Real Mallorca, Osasuna v Racing Santander, Real Sociedad v Real Zaragoza, Villarreal v Espanyol,

Barcelona v Sevilla (1700), Real Betis v Deportivo La Coruna (1900)

Taunts trigger Evra

AFP, London



Manchester United defender Patrice Evra can't wait to get onto the pitch at Wigan on Saturday so

he can avoid any more taunts from Sir Alex Ferguson.

French full-back Evra has suffered a hard time from United's Scottish boss this week after France were beaten by Scotland in a Euro 2008 qualifier last weekend.

The shock result was greeted with glee by Ferguson and he has been only too happy to remind Evra of the result by whistling the French national anthem whenever they have met this week.

As if that wasn't bad enough for Evra, who has been capped five times by France but was not involved in his country's loss at Hampden Park, he is guaranteed further teasing when United's Scotland midfielder Darren Fletcher catches up with him.

So Evra is glad the Premiership leaders' match against Wigan will take the focus off him and he told MUTV: "As soon as I got into the dressing room this week, the boss came in singing 'La Marseillaise'."

"I was talking with Mikael Silvestre before the match and we agreed it would be a difficult game. But Scotland only had three chances and they scored."

percent home record.

Tottenham goalkeeper Paul Robinson is also bound to feel a little extra pressure on Saturday, especially when he has to deal with any backpasses in his side's match at unbeaten Aston Villa.

Robinson has been widely criticised for his blunder during England's Euro 2008 qualifying defeat in Croatia on Wednesday when he allowed a Gary Neville backpass to bounce past him for the home side's second goal.

Chelsea were held to a draw by Aston Villa in their last match and, with a Champions League clash against Barcelona coming up next week, it would be easy to be distracted against newly-promoted Reading.

But England winger Joe Cole could make only his second start of the season after returning from a knee injury and he is confident he can keep his side on track at the Madejski Stadium.

Cole said: "The knee felt fine so I am back and ready for selection. I am just buzzing."

Blackburn's Australian defender Lucas Neill faces the club he openly admitted he wants to join when his side travel to Liverpool.

Neill was disappointed when Blackburn turned down an approach for him from Liverpool in August and revealed that he still hoped to move to Anfield when the transfer window reopens.

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FIXTURES

Saturday

Arsenal v Watford, Aston Villa v Tottenham, Liverpool v Blackburn, Man City v Sheff Utd, Middlesbrough v Everton, Portsmouth v West Ham, Reading v Chelsea, Wigan Athletic v Man Utd

Sunday

Newcastle v Bolton

Monday

Fulham v Charlton

'Podolski is a jewel'

Football