

Euro 2000

Busy night of qualifying ahead



PARIS, Sept 4: World champions France are not expected to have much trouble when they launch their Euro 2000 campaign against tiny Iceland in Reykjavik on Saturday, reports AFP.

But it's very different story for other major European sides. England return to the fray with an intriguing clash away to Sweden where both sides will have much to prove - England after their agonising loss to Argentina at France 98 and Sweden still smarting from the embarrassment of failing to qualify.

Italy and Spain are two other sides who will be hoping to put their largely unmemorable World Cup showings behind them - Italy taking on Wales at Anfield and Spain facing Cyprus in Nicosia.

The away trip to Iceland gives France their first official match as reigning world champions as Roger Lemerre picks up the coach's baton from Aimé Jacquet. After drawing 2-2 with Austria in a friendly last month, France know that they will be the team everybody will want to beat and they can take nothing for granted.

And Iceland have often given France problems in the past - forcing two goalless draws in eight previous matches.

France can expect an easy ride in Group Four, however, with Russia and Ukraine the only other sides likely to pose a serious threat, Armenia are the other side in the group.

"Our recent success was perhaps the worst possible thing for us," admits Lemerre.

"The best thing we can do is to hang onto the dynamism which went with our World Cup triumph."

France's European champions in 1984, certainly have much to live up to although Lemerre, having come from Jacquet's backroom staff, already knows the set-up like the back of his hand.

"We're not invincible and if a bad result comes along it could throw us and prompt doubts," says Lemerre.

But even without the suspended defensive linchpins of Laurent Blanc and Marcel Desailly, as well as the injured Emmanuel Petit, who needs a sinus operation, Brazil's conquerors expect to start off with a solid, if unspectacular win.

Ukraine host Russia in their opener and the result should provide an early pointer to which of the two sides will pose the French their main challenge.

England meanwhile head for Stockholm with Glenn Hoddle's ship having sailed into choppy waters after he and stalwart defender Tony Adams required 'clear the air' talks.

Adams has criticised the England manager in his newly-published book and said that he 'humiliated' David Beckham in a training session.

Adams also claimed he should be skipper in Alan Shearer's place, an implicit criticism of Hoddle.

Shearer, despite the unsettling events he is having to endure at Newcastle, is relishing the chance of linking up with Michael Owen again and insists there is no direct competition between them.

"The more players we have that are going to be successful, the more chance the England team has of being successful, which is what it's all about," he argued Thursday.

"We both managed to get a goal against Argentina although we didn't get the right result. If selected, let's hope we can both get a goal again on Saturday but this time get the right result."

Shearer says he is impressed with Owen not just as a footballer but also off the pitch. "He's been put under more pressure than some players will ever be put under but he's handled it and that will stand him in good stead for the future."

Italy enter a new era under Dino Zoff following the departure of Cesare Maldini after the Azzurri crashed out to France in the World Cup quarterfinals, their penalties jinx striking again just as it did at USA 94.

Zoff takes his charges for a group one match against Wales, who after showing occasional signs of promise in the 1970s and 1980s have stumbled into virtual oblivion this decade with hammerings from the likes of Georgia.

And the Welsh could reap an Italian whirlwind with the 55-year-old Zoff desperate to shine in his new post.

Already an icon for leading the Italians to the 1982 World Cup, Zoff expects to be more adventurous than Maldini and will ask for more goals from Christian Vieri, who has joined his coach's former club Lazio from Atletico Madrid.

That means that Zoff's former charge Pierluigi Casiraghi, now of Chelsea, will most likely have to wait for his chance.

Roberto Baggio should be there to pull the strings after a solid World Cup which secured a move to Inter Milan but a big question mark hangs over Alessandro Del Piero, a major disappointment at France 98.

Michele Serena, now playing for Atletico Madrid under Arrigo Sacchi, Maldini's predecessor, comes into defence at left back.

That would have allowed Paolo Maldini to move into central defence but the 30-year-old AC Milan defender, who has gone back on his post-World Cup decision to quit international soccer, misses the match with a stomach injury.

"This is my first match and I don't intend making many changes from the World Cup squad. But Maldini's injury is a blow to us," admitted Zoff.

Wales' main threat will come from Manchester United wide man Ryan Giggs, set to play his first game for his country for a year, while Denmark remain the most serious rivals standing in the way of Italy winning the group.

Spain, who went home after the group phase of the World Cup despite thrashing Bulgaria, will be hot favourites away to

Cyprus while elsewhere in the Group Six Austria face Israel. The Spanish are odds-on favourites to win the group and anything less will surely spell the end of Javier Clemente's reign. His position has already been in doubt ever since the opening World Cup defeat by Nigeria.

Clemente brings in fresh talent in the shape of Celta Vigo's promising defender Michel Salgado, a sometime Arsenal target and whose tackle cost Atletico Madrid's Juninho a broken leg last winter. Salgado later won an appeal against a four-match ban for the challenge.

Midfielder Santi Ezquerro, Bilbao's new signing from Atletico Madrid, is also in the frame while Santiago Canizares of Valencia is firmly ensconced in goal following the retirement of the legendary Antonio Zubizarreta.

Scotland, who once again failed to reach the second phase of the World Cup, open their Group Nine campaign with a visit to Lithuania and will later have to ensure they edge out the Czech Republic.

Manager Craig Brown is virtually resigned to being without Scott Gemmill and new Everton signing John Collins, who have groin injuries, while Craig Burley is suspended.

Skipper Colin Hendry, only a sub for Rangers at the weekend, will play, however.

Elsewhere, the Republic of Ireland face the might of Croatia, buoyed by their third-place World Cup finish, in a Group Eight which also contains Yugoslavia.

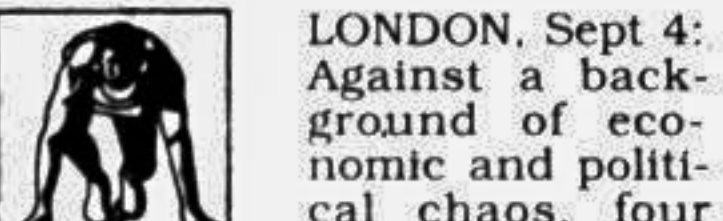
And Northern Ireland travel to Istanbul to take on Turkey in Group Three.

Both sides can also look forward to tussles with reigning European champions Germany. Germany do not begin their campaign until October 10, when they travel to Turkey and Berti Vogts' rejuvenated side will be glad to have the extra fortnight to recharge their batteries after their unconvincing 2-1 friendly win over Malta on Wednesday.



Nguyen Hong Son (C) of Vietnam about to score his team's second goal against Thailand in the semifinal of the Tiger Cup at Hanoi on September 3. The hosts won 3-0.

Golden League's last leg today



LONDON, Sept 4: Against a background of economic and political chaos, four track athletes could leave Moscow this weekend richer by at least a quarter of a million dollars, reports Reuters.

Saturday's Grand Prix final will feature Marion Jones, Bryan Brunson, Halle Gebrselassie and Hicham El Guerrouj, the only athletes still in contention for the Golden League million dollar jackpot.

The jackpot will be shared among athletes who have won each of their events in the six Saturday's Grand Prix final.

The meeting, which has 4.38 million dollars in prize money at stake, has inevitably been affected by the economic crisis in Russia, prompting fears among some of the American athletes about their safety.

World 100 metres champion Maurice Greene, his training partner and world 200 gold medalist Ato Boldon of Trinidad and US sprinter Jon Drummond have all pulled out of the meeting.

Drummond was the prime mover in a petition to the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) urging the world ruling body to switch the venue.

He said that, apart from safety considerations, it would be inappropriate for athletes to flaunt their wealth in front of impoverished Russians.

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"When you have to go somewhere that's unstable, you're worried," Johnson said. "You want to know what's going on and it's not only the Americans. Athletes from other countries, too, are having second thoughts."

Not surprisingly, the IAAF has rejected any thought of taking the final away from Moscow.

"I do not understand why they are concerned," said president Primo Nebiolo. "We have always been convinced that Americans are strong and they are not afraid of anything."

"Moscow has some financial problems but as far as security is concerned there are no problems."

One American athlete outwardly unconcerned about running in Moscow is Jones, who is fast overtaking Johnson as the sport's biggest attraction.

Jones, who has been in a class of her own in the women's 100 metres this year, said in Berlin that money was not her sole motivation as she extended her winning streak in all events this year to 31.

"The reason why I do this sport is because I want to prove that I am the fastest woman around," she said.

Gebrselassie, the world 5,000 metres record holder and El Guerrouj, the world 1,500 gold medalist and record holder, have similarly dominated their events this year and US 400 metres hurdles champion Brunson appears to be under the most pressure.

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Boost sports WHIZZ KID

Competition-102

Tick the Correct Answers Post to The Daily Star Win attractive prizes

Competition closes at 8 pm, Sept 11 '98, and draw shortly afterwards

1. How old is Sir Don Bradman? 80 90 100

2. Who is Newcastle's new coach? Gullit Vialli Robson

3. Who is the defending Wimbledon champion? Krajceck Rafter Sampras

4. Who won the Club Cup hockey title? Abahani Ajax Usha

5. Who lifted Emirates tri-series? England Sri Lanka S Africa

Name

Class Roll No.

School Address

Phone: (if any)

POWERED WITH EN-VITS ENERGY RELEASING VITAMINS

SPORTS TALK



Gary Linekar

(Former England footballer) "I have never been keen on managers condemning the players in public. I can't see any benefits from the situation."

Virus, the villain

LONDON, Sept 4: Paula Radcliffe, one of England's best hopes for a Commonwealth Games gold medal, withdrew from the team Friday because of a virus, reports AP.

Radcliffe, who placed fifth at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and fourth in the World Championship a year later, has run the second-best 5,000-metre time in the world this year. But she has not been able to train due to illness since returning from a disappointing European Championship campaign in Budapest two weeks ago.

The 24-year-old athlete went into the Euros as a favourite for a medal after dominating Irish rival Sonia O'Sullivan in a 3,000-metre race at the British Grand Prix in Sheffield.

She led most of 25 laps of the 10,000-metre at the Euros but couldn't kick when it counted and finished fifth as O'Sullivan claimed the first of her two gold medals for the championship.

Radcliffe said the virus made her feel very tired and unable to train or compete at the highest level.

Thailand, Indonesia fined \$40000 each

HANOI, Sept 4 (Reuters/Internet): Thailand and Indonesia, who both tried to lose to the other in their Tiger Cup match earlier this week, were each fined \$40,000 by the ASEAN Football Federation on Friday.

The regional body governing football in South East Asia imposed the fine after Indonesia deliberately lost 3-2 to Thailand with a blatant last-minute own goal on Monday.

ASEAN general secretary Paul Mony Samuel said they would be ratifying the decision taken earlier in the week by the Vietnamese Football Federation's tournament committee, the local organisers of the event to fine both sides equally.

Both teams are planning to appeal the decision while the ASEAN is looking at the rules of the competition to ensure there is no repeat of the farcical scenes that ruined the match as a genuine contest.

The matter is also due to be brought up at the executive committee meeting of the Asian Football Confederation, to be held in Kuala Lumpur next Friday.

Thailand won the game in Ho Chi Minh City when an Indonesian defender scored a deliberate own goal in injury time for his side to finish second in Group A.

Neither team wanted to win the group because that meant they would have had to travel from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi to face Vietnam in the semifinal.

In the event neither team progressed to the final. Singapore defeated Indonesia 2-1 in the first semifinal while Vietnam beat Thailand 3-0.



Roger Lemerre, the French national coach, shows the new team jersey with a yellow star commemorating their World Cup triumph, at Clairefontaine yesterday.

Perkins back at his best

SYDNEY, Sept 4: Olympic silver medalist Daniel Perkins was back in full training with the rest of the 41-strong Australian swimming team in Singapore Friday after a bout of the flu a couple of weeks ago disrupted his preparations.

After watching the three Australians train, Talbot said only a brave person would be willing a place a bet on the outcome in Kuala Lumpur.

"I wouldn't gamble on that at all, not a chance in hell," Talbot said.

Although 25-year-old Perkins, the world record holder, has not cracked 15 minutes since his dramatic victory from lane eight in Atlanta two years ago, Talbot said he could not be left out of the equation in KL.

"Kieren is the world record holder. Grant and Daniel are both great athletes but despite what they've done they haven't been within 10 or 12 seconds of what Kieren's best is," Talbot said.

"Lately, there's been a question mark about Kieren because he's been ill and he's got all these life stresses on him. He's been married. He's got a baby. They have a cost. But the only comment I can say about Kieren at this point is that he's swimming much better than he was in Atlanta and he won in Atlanta."

Perkins, whose wife is expecting their second child next February, will go into his first major international meet since Atlanta ranked number five in the 30-lap event behind Hackett, Kowalski, Britain's Olympic bronze medalist Graeme Smith, and South African Ryk Neethling.

It will be the first time Perkins and Hackett have met at a big international and Talbot is clearly rubbing his hands in anticipation of the contest.

"Grant won the world championship. He doesn't want to let that go and he knows what he's going to run into with Kieren," Talbot said.

Mexico Diego's next destination?

GUADALAJARA, Mexico, Sept 4: Controversial former Argentina skipper Diego Maradona could bounce back into football as coach of Mexican side Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara, who said Thursday they have made him an offer, reports AFP.

"We are awaiting his response, said club vice-president Eduardo Leano.

"We have to be cautious about how we proceed but we have heard from reports in Argentina that a Mexican side is after him and we know we are that side because we made him an offer," Leano said.

Universidad sacked Mexican coach Victor Manuel Vucetich and had been hoping to line up either Maradona, former Argentine national coach Cesar Luis Menotti or Dutch veteran Leo Beenhakker.

Leano said the club had not made any concrete arrangement with Maradona, but "simply registered our interest."

Maradona has fond memories of Mexico as it was there that he skipped Argentina to the 1986 World Cup after scoring his "hand of God" goal along the way to knock out England.

Reports earlier this month said Maradona, 37, was mulling yet another playing comeback with Spanish Second Division side Espanol.

Atherton scare for Lancs

LONDON, Sept 4: England opener Mike Atherton faces a fitness test on his back before Lancashire's NatWest Trophy final with Derbyshire at Lord's on Saturday, reports AFP.

Lancashire skipper Wasim Akram, Pakistan's world-class all-rounder, said today: "We think he will be okay."

But the county, bidding for its third NatWest triumph in the last 15 years, is taking no chances and has named Mike Watkinson and young batsman Mark Chilton as cover in a 14-strong squad.

Atherton missed the Oval Test against Sri Lanka because of the injury and also struggled during Lancashire's championship win over Derbyshire on Thursday.

Former England left-hander Neil Fairbrother will be in the Lancashire line-up and will make a record 10th limited over-competition final appearance.

"Even though it is my 10th final, the will to win and pride is just as big in 1998 as it was in 1984," stressed the 34-year-old left-hander.

Derbyshire will be led by England swing bowler Dominic Cork, backed up by former skipper Kim Barnett and Karl Krikken.

What's eating Merson?

LONDON, Sept 4 (AFP): England player Paul Merson has quit English Premiership club Middlesbrough just weeks after signing a new contract, a report said today.

Merson, in England's squad for Saturday's Euro 2000 qualifier in Sweden, has signed a contract with another Premiership club, the Sun newspaper said, without identifying the outfit.

But Middlesbrough manager Bryan Robson responded immediately by denouncing the report.

The newspaper said that Merson, who still receives treatment to combat alcoholism, has become increasingly worried by the effects Paul Gascoigne's drinking bouts could have on him.

Merson has just signed a new five-year contract with Middlesbrough.

Tyson in more hot water

WASHINGTON, Sept 4: A second time in two days, Mike Tyson was assaulted by a Maryland suburb filed a criminal assault charge Thursday against the former heavy-weight boxing champion, reports AP.

Abmielec Saucedo, 62, says Tyson punched him in the face "without warning" as Saucedo talked with another driver following the accident on Monday.

Saucedo's car struck a car driven by Richard Hardick, which then struck a Mercedes driven by Tyson's wife at a Gaithersburg, Maryland intersection on Monday.

Hardick, 50, filed a similar complaint against Tyson on Wednesday, saying Tyson kicked him in the groin following the accident.

Each man corroborates the other's story in his complaint. Tyson, 32, has denied the allegations.

"I did not kick anyone. I did not punch anyone," Tyson said in a statement released Wednesday through his lawyer, John G. Branca.

"My wife and I were the victims of a traffic accident. I am distressed by these false allegations. I did not touch anyone," he said.

His wife backed up his story, saying: "Mike did not punch, kick or touch anyone at any time."

"I was talking with the driver of the car in front of me when Mr. Tyson came at me. Saucedo said in his complaint, 'Without warning he punched me in the face with his fist.'"

"I saw stars, cut my upper lip and I was bleeding," Saucedo added.

Saucedo and Hardick described returning to their cars because of Tyson's agitated state, only to have men who had previously tried to restrain Tyson reach into their cars and remove their keys from the ignitions to keep them leaving.

The team is still eligible for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, however, which some reports in the Chinese media say are the sole focus of the coach's attention.

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SIX NO TRUMPS

A K Sayeedul Huq SOUTH REASSESSED HIS HAND TO REACH AN EXCELLENT CONTRACT

(Hand # 84)

Table with 4 columns: North, West, East, South (D). Contains card symbols and counts.

BIDDING (East-West were vulnerable)

Bidding table with 4 columns: South (Mazumdar), West (Mizan), North (Mannan), East (Zaglu). Contains bidding actions like 1H, 2C, 3H, etc.

THE PLAY

As expected West opened the King of Spades which was ruffed by the declarer in the closed hand. He was pleased to see the dummy as it was much better than what he anticipated. There was nothing much to play, as a Club ruff in the dummy established the suit. The Diamonds were perfectly distributed, and the slam was easily made.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS 1 Tease machine symbol 43 matter 44 Dictionary abbr. 46 Heron's cousin 50 Occult star 55 Bunyan's prop 56 Malarial symptom 57 Any time now 58 Wire 59 Cassius' location? 60 Grogginess Coast st. 61 Religious TV abbr. 62 Sol. time: 20 mins. 63 Small ducks 64 Real swinger 65 Laugh-a-minute 66 Berlin's 'what?' 67 Tring ratios 68 Conk out 69 Make-up artist? 70 Inclination 71 Slog 72 Pismire 73 Moreover 74 Hit the ice 75 Adjusted the strings 76 Verdi opus 77 Undo a dele 78 Dosage, maybe 79 Singer Brickell 80 Linguist Chomsky 81 Walter's handout 82 Ases caller ID, perhaps 83 Cheered 84 Crane 85 Cagers' org. 86 Stocking woe 87 Freeway access 88 Labyrinth goal 89 State 90 Worker's due 91 Freudian concept 92 Conventional 93 Wildebeest 94 'Pink Panther' actor



CRYPTOQUIP

G A T D I T P G A T P Z K W K R Z P G K B G T I B T T W P G A D G W Z B T Z P D R D P

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: I THINK SOMEONE DEFINED KINDRED AS THE FEAR OF ALL VISITS FROM RELATIVES. Today's Cryptiquip clue: R equals G. 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.