

Tasty friendlies



Spellbinding match-ups are on show as those who qualified for the World Cup finals start their warm-up for the greatest football show on earth which begins in Seoul on May 31.

The clash between Spain and fellow World Cup finalists bound Portugal could prove to be a fore-taste of this summer's final itself with the proviso that the Spanish finally set aside their underachievers tag at a major final.

World champions France meanwhile entertain Romania with coach Roger Lemerre having three months to achieve the unenviable task of improving on a team that has won the World Cup and European championship in the past four years.

Another match could provide an insight into the strengths of the dark horses with the Republic of Ireland hosting Russia.

FRANCE V ROMANIA

Let Lemerre believe Wednesday's match with Romania at the Stade de France won't be a real test for his team the promoters poster did enough to gee up their opponents with its image of a violinist evoking sensitive memories of their gypsy past.

While the Romanian press started the furore they found a willing aide in French champions Nantes' Romanian international striker Viorel Moldovan.

"The ad agency responsible for this has made a serious error. Already for the 1994 World Cup we were compared to gypsies by the French press," he stormed.

"I don't understand why when we have cordial relations with the French every time we come to play they stoke up this hackneyed old image of Romanians," he added.

For Lemerre, though, it will serve as a chance for the players on the fringe of his squad to prove their worth against a side, who failed to qualify for football's showpiece event, just a matter of months before France kick off the World Cup against Senegal in Seoul on May 31.

One of those looking to catch Lemerre's eye is Barcelona defender Philippe Christanval. He was not picked for the Euro 2000-winning squad, despite being selected for the pre-tournament training.

He can see the parallel with this World Cup warm-up match. "If I play against Romania, a great



Portuguese superstar Luis Figo, being escorted by two Police officers on his arrival in Barcelona from Lisbon yesterday for the friendly against Spain on Wednesday.

SPAIN V PORTUGAL

deal will be at stake, even a place in the World Cup. "After this, the coach will make his decisions and perhaps he has virtually finalised the squad in his head. Had I not been picked for this match, I definitely would have ruled out my World Cup chances."

One player out of Wednesday's match is goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, who has a back injury and has been replaced in the squad by Lyon keeper Gregory Coupet, though Bordeaux' Ulrich Rame should start.

Striker David Trezeguet and defender Lilian Thuram sat out Monday's opening training session at France's base in Clairefontaine after playing an Italian league match for Juventus a day earlier, but they were expected to play on Wednesday.

Midfield masters Zinedine Zidane and Patrick Vieira will also play some part on Wednesday.

However Moldovan believes that Romania will be worthy opponents to knock the world champions confidence ahead of their major target.

"I'd be ready to bet we will not be defeated," said Moldovan. "A good showing would pull us up out of the slump after our World Cup disappointment."

GERMANY V ISRAEL

German coach Rudi Voller has had to deal with a whole series of injuries to key players in the run-up to their international friendly against Israel in Kaiserslautern.

Injury or illness has ruled out defender Marco Rehmer, midfielder Jorg Bohme and strikers Oliver Neuville, Alexander Zickler and Jorg Heinrich.

Hertha Berlin's Rehmer hurt his calf, Schalke 04's Bohme has flu, Leverkusen's Neuville has a foot injury and Bayern Munich's Zickler ripped a muscle while Heinrich pulled a right thigh muscle.

CROATIA V BULGARIA

Elsewhere 1998 semi-finalists Croatia host Bulgaria, who reached the last four in 1994 but have failed to make it this time.

The Croats seemingly ageless Robert Prosinecki will be out to show that not even playing English First Division football for Portsmouth should stop him from going to his third World Cup finals.

Who's the boss?

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan's Argentinian coach Hector Cuper woke up Monday with his authority undermined by a week he would rather forget.

The 2-1 defeat by Bologna at the Stadio Dell'Ara left Inter, winless now in three matches, back in third place, a point behind Juventus and two points adrift of AS Roma.

But more worrying for Cuper is the way his judgement in the transfer market has been called into question and why he was kept out of the loop as Inter decided to authorise their Brazilian striker Ronaldo to continue his recovery in Rio de Janeiro rather than Italy.

Cuper was left powerless by a statement by the club's medical staff on Saturday night that the player could stay in Rio for 'climatic and psychological' reasons. That was seen by many as code for permission to attend the Rio carnival instead of returning on Sunday as had been originally planned.

Cuper did not hide his frustration and after the Bologna match said he was still expecting the player to arrive before midnight.

"I know nothing of what has been said over the past few hours and I am expecting Ronaldo on Sunday as was originally scheduled," said Cuper.

"If he does not come back then we will see what needs to be done." Cuper added: "There are no gods in my Inter. There is no saviour."

By Sunday night, Cuper had finally accepted the player would be staying in Brazil, saying: "He was meant to be back on the 10th. The Inter doctor thought it was better to let him continue training at Rio. He cannot work with us, I must accept the doctor's decision."

Inter president Massimo Moratti entered the fray Monday. "We don't need to make this into Ronaldo-gate," he said. "But to speak and be frank with each other. He is an Inter player and a Brazil player but first and foremost an Inter player."

"Cuper and (Brazil coach Luiz Felipe) Scolari will talk to each other soon. Between Inter and the Brazilian federation there must be a clear relationship, avoiding possible spitefulness."

Earlier in the week questions were raised about Cuper's judgement in the transfer market.

Argentina v Wales Closed roof and Caniggia



Argentina take on Wales at the Millennium Stadium here Wednesday, the South Americans hoping to steal a march on this summer's World Cup opponents England by playing under a closed roof.

Argentina will play England in their second group fixture in the indoor arena of Japan's Sapporo Dome on June 7 and want to have the experience of playing in such conditions before they arrive in the Far East.

Wales, who failed to qualify for Japan and South Korea, won the vote over Norway and Turkey as friendly opponents because of the lure of playing under Cardiff's retractable roof.

England have chosen to play Holland in the Amsterdam Arena on the same night for the same reason, but unfortunately for Sven Goran Eriksson's men the Dutch Football Association have insisted the roof will remain open unless there is a heavy downpour of rain.

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) had to act quickly to make sure everything was in place for their match against exciting Argentina, already installed as firm favourites to win the World Cup.

"We have moved heaven and earth to put this on. We were only asked to play them last Thursday, and since then we have sorted out all the administration," said FAW spokesman Mark Evans.

"Police, stadium authorities, stewards and ticketing have all been put in place in just a few days."

The match also features the unlikely return from the international wilderness of veteran Glasgow Rangers striker Claudio Caniggia, who is expected to feature for Argentina, six years after he last represented his country.

The 48-times capped forward was named in Marcelo Bielsa's squad and despite being 35 years of age will compete with Gabriel Batistuta and Hernan Crespo for a place in this summer's World Cup squad.

Caniggia last featured for Argentina in July 1996 when they drew 0-0 against Peru under former boss Daniel Passarella and must

have thought his international days were well and truly over.

But the rebirth of his career in Scotland - firstly with Dundee and now with Rangers - has resulted in a renewed interest in the striker who played at the 1990 and 1994 World Cup finals and he admits he is relying on hints he has heard from journalists that there is a fourth striker's berth available.

"I am still hopeful that I can go," he said.

"I know it will be difficult because I didn't play in the 16-game qualifying league in South America.

"Maybe there will be a big change. I hope so - although I have not heard anything.

"But I know the coach - and they



CLAUDIO CANIGGIA

know me, the people in Argentina. Sometimes journalists tell me they have three strikers and need maybe one more," he added.

Welsh winger Ryan Giggs was surprised to hear the World Cup favourites were coming to Cardiff, but the Manchester United star is relishing the challenge of facing Batistuta and company.

"I must admit I was pretty shocked when I first heard the Welsh FA were lining up a game against Argentina," said Giggs.

"I was even more stunned because everything had happened so quickly but I can't think of better opposition for us to be playing right now."

"Everybody knows about our problems in the recent World Cup qualifying campaign and some people might think we'd be better served playing a less dangerous side than Argentina right now. I completely disagree."

Giggs believes the disparity in the two teams' fortunes does not

Bitter Montella extends contract

AFP, Rome

AS Roma striker Vincenzo Montella has extended his contract with the Italian First Division champions until 2006, the Italian sports press reported Tuesday.

Montella on Saturday signed a two-year extension of his previous contract which ran until 2004 but speculation remains that the Italian international is no longer part of coach Fabio Capello's plans.

The Italian international forward did not hide his displeasure when Capello refused to bring him on during Sunday's 0-0 draw with Juventus at the Olympic Stadium.

Montella, who scored 13 goals - many of them crucial - during his side's march to the Scudetto last season, is increasingly frustrated at his lack of first-team opportunities and was not named in Giovanni Trapattoni's squad for Wednesday's friendly with the United States.

The new contract is still to be ratified by league chiefs but has been signed by both club and player.

Djorkaeff Bolton bound?

AFP, Kaiserslautern, Germany

French World Cup-winning midfielder Youri Djorkaeff told AFP here on Monday that he was about to move to English Premiership strugglers Bolton Wanderers.

The 32-year-old said he would be organising a press conference on Tuesday to announce his "imminent departure" to join Bolton on a three-month deal, ending an unhappy period at Kaiserslautern.

"I want to say goodbye to the club and if necessary, although I don't want to, tell things as they really are," he said.

And Djorkaeff, who is desperate to make France's World Cup finals squad, fired a threat at the Bundesliga club.

"If the club doesn't keep its commitments to me, I will force the issue by making statements which could change a lot of things," he said.

"The commitment of the club, reiterated to me by the coach (Andreas Brehme) and the president (Jurgen) Friedrich just eight days ago, is the following: if I find a club, they will let me leave for nothing," he added.

Police raid Roma HQ

AFP, Rome

Officers of Italy's financial police on Monday raided the offices of Italian First Division champions AS Roma, ANSA news agency reported.

Police sources indicated the officers, who spent two hours at the offices, are looking at documents relating to advertising revenue from businesses that want to advertise at the Olympic Stadium during matches.

Details were scarce but reports said the investigators were investigating an advertising hoarding which carried the name of an English bookmaker that is not licensed to operate in Italy.

The reports also say that Roma had been unaware of the situation until Monday's raid.

Italy v USA Time to experiment



AFP, Catania, Italy

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni and Bruce Arena have a chance to fine-tune their prospective squads for the World Cup as Italy meet the United States here on Wednesday.

Three months before the finals in Japan and South Korea, both coaches admit that the result here will be less important than the chance to try new options as the deadline looms.

But everything points to a win for Italy who can bank on the traditionally passionate support of Sicilian fans in a match that will be played in the shadow of Europe's biggest active volcano, Mount Etna.

Italy are one of just seven nations to have won the World Cup but, in football terms at least, the US are very much a developing nation with men's soccer still in the shadow of basketball, baseball, American football and even women's soccer.

Arena was honest enough to admit that a win is against the odds despite a series of impressive friendly scalps including Brazil.

"Italy is one of the greatest teams in the world, they have so many great players," said Arena. "Everyone expects them to win on Wednesday. It will be an exception if we win."

Arena is pitting his wits against one of the world's most established coaches, but for both coaches the priority is the same as they put the final touches to their lists of 22 players for Asia.

"My World Cup starts now," said Trapattoni. "Regarding the (World Cup) squad I already have 15-18 names. I am looking at other names now as alternatives."

Trapattoni called up two new faces for the squad to face the United States with Chievo striker Massimo Marazzina the first man to represent the surprise packages from Verona on the international stage and Torino midfielder Antonio Asta getting the nod for the first time at the age of 31.

Equally noticeable are the players omitted and AC Milan midfielder Demetrio Albertini and Inter Milan's Luigi Di Biagio must know their exclusion does not augur well.

Lazio defender Alessandro Nesta was also omitted but he only returned from an injury lay-off on Sunday and Trapattoni is resting him as a precaution.

With Paolo Maldini unavailable through injury that means only Parma's Fabio Cannavaro is available of Trapattoni's preferred three-man unit of Cannavaro, Nesta and Maldini.

Training ground injuries Monday to Brescia's Daniele Bonera and AS Roma's Christian Panucci, himself called up as a late replacement for injured Lazio defender Paolo Negro, have further complicated Trapattoni's defence and he has called up Parma's Gianluigi Sartor

Holland v England De Boer plans English blues



AFP, Amsterdam

England's build-up to the World Cup begins in earnest Wednesday when they play Holland in an international friendly at the Amsterdam Arena.

Astonishingly Holland, twice World Cup finalists in the 1970s, are not going to this year's tournament whereas England, whose qualifying campaign began with a 1-0 defeat at home to Germany, will be one of the 32 sides in Japan and South Korea come May.

Experienced Dutch international Frank de Boer is keen to remind the rest of the world that his team can still be a force to be reckoned with.

"For us it is an opportunity to restore some of our tarnished reputation after failing to qualify for the World Cup," the 31-year-old Barcelona defender told his personal website at icons.com.

"The pain of failing to qualify has grown daily as the World Cup gets nearer and the chance to remind the world of the pedigree of Dutch football against England is priceless," he added.

"We will not be in Japan and Korea in a few months time but by beating England we will remind everyone that the competition will be poorer without us.

"I feel that we are more than capable of beating the current England side next week but this may not be the case in two or three years time when some of the young stars like Michael Owen, Emile Heskey and Rio Ferdinand have fully matured, never mind those who have not yet even been capped."

At least he will be spared Owen on Wednesday - the Liverpool striker withdrew from the squad on Monday with knee ligament damage.

The Dutch, in the first game of manager Dick Advocaat's second spell in charge, will not be bending over backwards to do their opponents any favours off the pitch either.

England are due to face World Cup favourites Argentina in a group match under the roof of the Sapporo

Dome in Japan on June 7. But any hopes they have of getting used to covered conditions in Holland depend entirely on the weather.

On Monday, the Dutch Football Association confirmed that the Amsterdam Arena's sliding roof would not be closed unless there was a huge downpour.

But whatever the weather it won't just be the stadium that has an experimental look. With four friendlies still to come as part of their World Cup build-up, England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has selected a youthful squad to face the Dutch.



FRANK DE BOER

As well as West Ham midfielder Joe Cole, who only has one appearance as a substitute behind him there are four uncapped players in the squad - Southampton full-back Wayne Bridge, Tottenham central defender Ledley King and strikers Darius Vassell of Aston Villa and Michael Ricketts of Bolton.

Bridge, 21, has been one of the key performers for his hometown club this season and with England first-choice Ashley Cole injured, could win his first cap Wednesday.

"I would not feel overawed or out of place, and if I am going to get a chance before the World Cup finals then now is probably the time," said Bridge.

"Sven-Goran Eriksson is likely to do any experimenting sooner rather than later so this might be my chance. It would be a hell of a game to make my debut.

"It would be a great experience and a dream come to true to play for

England against the Dutch in Amsterdam, but I'm not taking anything for granted."

Bolton forward Ricketts has scored 15 Premiership goals for the top-flight strugglers so far this season and his club manager Sam Allardyce believes he is well worthy of a place.

"He has been playing very well this year. He is quick and has been scoring lots of goals. He deserves his chance," said Allardyce.

"He's netted fabulous strikes against the likes of Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool proving he can compete against



MICHAEL OWEN...out

some of the best players in the world," Allardyce added.

"I hope he does well and at that level and can force his way into Sven's plans for the World Cup finals."

Apart from Owen, England captain David Beckham (ankle) and fellow midfielder Steven Gerrard (hamstring) are facing fitness battles while Darren Anderton and Trevor Sinclair have also already withdrawn because of injuries.

Holland inflicted England's first defeat under Swedish supremo Eriksson with a 2-0 friendly win back in August at White Hart Lane.

But Eriksson made a raft of changes at half-time and any Dutch confidence quickly disappeared when the following month they were beaten 1-0 by the Republic of Ireland in a World Cup qualifier in Dublin.



Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni makes a point during a press conference at Coverciano, near Florence on February 11.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Table with crossword clues: ACROSS 1 Energy, 4 Far, 8 Gaucho's weapon, 12 Dander, 13 Cupid's field, 14 Writer, 15 Has the where-withal, 16 Cartoon character, 18 Same, 20 Harbor boat, 21 Leopard's co-defendant, 24 Coach, 28 Cartoon character, 32 Not kosher, 33 Exist, 34 Sag, 36 Actress, 37 Approach, 39 Cartoon character, 41 Yawned, 43 Say it ain't so, 44 Zero-star review, 46 Bet both ways, 50 Cartoon character, 55 Tin Woodman's need, 56 Go, 57 Dixie, 58 Wapiti, 59 Way out, 60 Quaker's address, 61 Paulo, 2 Neighbor of Turkey, 3 Options list, 4 Rag, 5 Outback bird, 6 Journal, 7 Formerly, 8 Purchased, 9 Possess, 10 Actor, 11 Whatever amount, 17 Clear the tables, 19 TV alien, 22 Inducing goose-flesh (Var.), 23 Dracula's auto-nance, Solution time: 25 mins.

Cryptogram grid with letters B J Z W F V O B F D V C X J L N W F N R P V Z C X R D L M K P E D O F W V P V Z L X N R L L L K D ' L F W D F E R V P G M P G

CRYPTOQUIP

Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF A GOLF CADDIE IS DOING INVENTORY, SOME MIGHT CLEVERLY SAY HE'S A TEE TOTALER.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: P equals I

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.