



Michael Owen (C) the England captain sharing a light moment with defender Rio Ferdinand (R) and an unidentified teammate during a training session at Villa Park yesterday.

Portugal v England

Mission 'start afresh'

Football

REUTERS, London

Michael Owen will lead out a new-look England side for Saturday's friendly against Portugal, as both countries re-group after their World Cup disappointments.

England are still smarting at missing what they believe was an opportunity to go all the way in the Far East, when a poor second half performance in defeat to Brazil brought them down to earth in the quarter-finals.

Portugal, much-vaunted before the tournament after reaching the semi-finals of Euro 2000, failed to even survive the group phase after a campaign that began with a humiliating 3-2 defeat to the United States.

England will be using this weekend's clash at Villa Park as a warm-up ahead of their qualifying campaign for the 2004 European cham-

PROBABLE TEAMS
England: David James; Danny Mills, Jonathan Woodgate, Rio Ferdinand, Ashley Cole; Owen Hargreaves, Lee Bowyer, Steven Gerrard, Trevor Sinclair, Michael Owen, Emile Heskey
Portugal: Vitor Baia; Beto Severo, Fernando Couto, Fernando Meira, Rui Jorge; Sergio Conceicao, Armando Petit, Rui Costa, Luis Figo, Simao Sabrosa, Pedro Pauleta.

ampionships, for which Portugal qualify automatically as hosts.

Owen will be wearing the captain's armband in the absence of injured skipper David Beckham -- and the omens are certainly good.

Owen's first stab at the captaincy came in April when England demolished Paraguay 4-0 in a friendly at Anfield, with the Liverpool striker scoring after just four minutes in front of his adoring Kop.

Portugal may be a different proposition, but Owen and his team

mates will be out to impress the home crowd with a performance that would turn the page after the World Cup.

Helping that process will be the arrival of new faces, notably from Leeds United, with defender Jonathan Woodgate and goalscoring midfielder Lee Bowyer set to turn out.

Woodgate is back in the England set-up after a court case, following an assault on a student in January 2000, which ended with his conviction for affray last December.

With Sol Campbell injured, Woodgate should play alongside his former Leeds team mate Rio Ferdinand in central defence.

With midfielder Beckham, Paul Scholes and Kieron Dyer all out, there is a plenty of scope to hand an England debut to Bowyer, who was cleared of all charges in the same court case as Woodgate.

The match will also be a chance for combative Leeds striker Alan Smith, whose poor disciplinary record last season effectively ruled

him out of contention for the World Cup.

"You have to believe you're good enough to be in the England squad and I do believe that, but I just wasn't on the pitch long enough (last season)," Smith told British newspapers.

"I only had myself to blame. The positive thing is that it happened to me so early (in my career) -- early enough for me to have a second chance to put things right."

With David Seaman not selected, Leeds goalkeeper Paul Robinson, a former under-21 regular, might also get 45 minutes.

For Portugal players such as Luis Figo and Rui Costa, the objective is straightforward.

"They are going to show that what happened in the World Cup was an accident," interim coach Agostinho Oliveira said this week.

"I ask the players to do their best as a way to reconcile the country with Portuguese soccer. I hope it is possible to do this immediately."

Keane in thick soup

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United's controversial captain Roy Keane could find himself in further trouble with the Football Association (FA) after he admitted Friday he had deliberately stamped on Gareth Southgate in the 1995 FA Cup semi-final with Crystal Palace.

The 31-year-old Irishman, who was sent home in disgrace before the World Cup finals after launching a tirade of foul-mouthed abuse at manager Mick McCarthy, said that Southgate should not have been lying on the ground.

"He shouldn't be lying on the floor," Keane told the Sun.

"Defenders shouldn't be on their backsides."

"I felt that he got in the way," he added.

Keane has already been charged with bringing the game into disrepute for comments he made in his autobiography over deliberately injuring Norwegian international Alf-Inge Haaland and was sent-off in last Saturday's 1-1 draw with Sunderland for elbowing former Irish team-mate Jason McAteer.

McAteer had been one of his fiercest critics following his outburst at McCarthy and had said he would rather read children's book 'Bob the Builder' rather than Keane's autobiography, which was ghost written by Eamon Dunphy notorious for his dislike of McCarthy and predecessor Jack Charlton.

Keane has decided that with a three match ban in the offing for the McAteer incident and a potentially enormous ban from the FA it would be the right time to undergo an operation on his troublesome hip.

Ominously Keane also admits that having repaid Haaland for his telling him to get up off the ground in

a previous encounter when in fact the turbulent Irishman had injured his cruciate ligaments he had plenty of other personal scores to settle.

"There's plenty more to be settled," he said.

Keane also had another go at his former international team-mates despite earlier saying he wanted to make peace with them.

"My heart went out to certain players (when Ireland exited in the second round to Spain on penalties the only match of theirs he admitted watching while he watched all of England's because he said he had club mates playing for them).

"There are one or two decent blokes but there are others... muppets would be the right word for them."

Keane's hurt at the lack of support he received from former drinking pal Steve Staunton, who took over the captaincy after his sacking, with his complaints over the preparation for the finals surfaced again.

"Steve Staunton is quick to turn around and say 'Roy Keane used language like I have never heard before."

"Wxxxxx! Has he never heard that word before!"

"He's been under John Gregory and Graeme Souness."

"I'm sure the used words like that," said Keane.

McCarthy for his part admitted in Moscow, where Ireland are preparing for their first Euro 2004 qualifier with Russia, he would always be remembered as the man who sent Keane home.

"I expect I will probably have lost my teeth and my eyesight and people will still shout at me that I was the one who sent Roy Keane home from the World Cup."

"I have no idea when it is going to end," said McCarthy, who has refused to reply to Keane's incessant onslaught since the finals but has a book due out soon.

QUALIFYING FIXTURES	
EURO 2004 PORTUGAL	
Matches in the Euro 2004 qualifying competition (kick-off times in GMT):	
Saturday	
GROUP 1	Cyprus v France (1730) Slovenia v Malta (1815)
GROUP 2	Norway v Denmark (1400) Bosnia v Romania (1815)
GROUP 3	Austria v Moldova (1500) Netherlands v Belarus (1830)
GROUP 4	Latvia v Sweden (1800) San Marino v Poland (1800)
GROUP 5	Faroe Islands v Scotland (1400) Lithuania v Germany (1730)
GROUP 6	Armenia v Ukraine (1500) Greece v Spain (1845)
GROUP 7	Turkey v Slovakia (1730)
GROUP 8	Croatia v Estonia (1600) Belgium v Bulgaria (1800)
GROUP 9	Finland v Wales (1600) Azerbaijan v Italy (1800)
GROUP 10	Russia v Ireland (1500)
Sunday	
GROUP 7	Liechtenstein v Macedonia (1500)
GROUP 10	Switzerland v Georgia (1400)

ROK get technical advisor Hiddink

AFP, Seoul

Former coach Guus Hiddink signed an agreement Friday to act as a technical advisor for Republic of Korea's national football team in a deal estimated at some 100,000 dollars per year.

Under the contract inked with the Korea Football Association, Hiddink will advise the team until June 2004, visiting South Korea a few times each year.

"I am very pleased that I have signed a new contract in a new environment. I'll do my best to contribute to the development of South Korean football," Hiddink said.

The agreement calls for the Dutchman to help young Korean players train in the Netherlands and hold two coaching programs in South Korea during the contract period.

Hiddink arrived in Seoul Wednesday for a five-day visit, during which he will sit on the bench to watch an inter-Korean match Saturday, promote his recently released autobiography "My Way" and sign lucrative endorsement deals with South Korean firms.

He returned to the Netherlands to coach his former charges PSV Eindhoven after completing a dramatic 18-month mission to make South Korea Asia's top team.

Since South Korea became the first Asian team to reach the semi-finals of the World Cup tournament - co-hosted with Japan -- Hiddink has become the most popular foreigner in the country's history.

He has been made an honorary citizen and showered with financial rewards and advertising contracts.

Hiddink had earlier promised to stay engaged in Korean football as an advisor ahead of the 2004 Olympics and 2006 World Cup.

Serie A in doubt again

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Eight top-flight Italian clubs without pay-per-view television contracts are threatening to further delay the start of the Serie A season after rejecting the latest contract offer.

Italy's two pay-TV platforms, Telepiu and Stream, raised their offers to the consortium of smaller Serie A clubs to around 52 million euros, but the eight clubs are demanding 10 million each for rights to live coverage of their home games.

The championship was due to start on September 1 but was delayed for two weeks due to the failure to reach agreement over television rights.

Although the Italian Football League has signed a three-year deal with state broadcaster RAI for the highlights to the top two professional divisions, the eight clubs say they are not ready to start the season until their own deals are resolved.

"In the light of the new situation...it is impossible to consent to a correct carrying out of the matches," said Plus Media Trading, the consortium of eight Serie A and three Serie B clubs in a statement.

The eight Serie A clubs are Atalanta, Brescia, Chievo, Como, Empoli, Modena, Perugia and Piacenza.

The consortium have won the support of AS Roma president Franco Sensi who is insisting that the league will not start on September 14.

"The championship will not start in this manner. That is what the eight clubs without contracts have said and Roma is with them. In this situation we are not playing," Sensi told the daily Corriere della Sera.

On Tuesday both the Football League and the Italian Football Federation insisted that the championship will commence as planned.

League president Adriano Galliani told those clubs threatening not to play that they will have 3-0 defeats imposed on them if they fail to take to the field.

Nothing wrong with missing Lions!

Football

AFP, Dakar

Senegal's star striker El-Hadji Diouf denied here Friday he had ever said he was boycotting the national team despite not turning up for training for this weekend's African Nations Cup final in Mali, dismissed suggestions by former national boss Bruno Metsu he had told him he was boycotting the "Lions of Teranga" because the Frenchman had been sacked after he asked for a 10-month sabbatical.

"I have never threatened to boycott the national side," he said.

"I warned the national federation that I would not be available for this match."

Metsu remains my friend and if he decides to return I will be the happiest man around.

"However when I play for the national side it is not because of one particular individual. I play because I am proud to be Senegalese," he added.

Sarr called up two French-based players, Souleymane Camara of Monaco and Abdoulaye Diagne Faye from Diouf's former club Lens as replacements for Diouf and Diaio.

Atletico eyeing Mrs Ronaldo

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid captured the headlines by signing Brazilian World Cup star Ronaldo, but local rivals Atletico are hoping to see a split in family loyalties by snapping up his soccer-playing wife for their women's team.

"We have been talking with Ronaldo and he has promised to tell of our interest in signing her for the forthcoming season," Lola Romero, president of the Atletico Madrid women's section, was quoted as saying in sports daily As.

"We know there will be a lot of competition, but we are hopeful she will end up playing for us."

Former model Milene Domingues, who married Ronaldo in 1999, plays midfield for Serie A women's side Monza in Italy and has made it clear she is keen to continue her sporting career when she follows her husband to Spain.

Real do not have a women's team and the race to sign her is unlikely to become as convoluted as the saga that surrounded her husband's 45 million Euro (\$44.87 million) move from Inter Milan.

However, there are some comparisons.

When playing in Brazil, Mrs Ronaldo was sidelined with a knee injury for two seasons.

A new Korean sunrise

Football

AFP, Seoul

A friendly football match between North and South Korea here on Saturday is expected to add heat to a perceptible thaw in Cold War ties between the two rival nations.

With the blessing of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il and the support of South Korean counterpart Kim Dae-Jung, the match marks a high-point in sporting ties frozen for more than a decade.

It will act as a springboard for the North's participation in the Asian Games staged in the South Korean port city of Busan three weeks later.

"We have to win of course," said an official at the presidential Blue House here. "But it is about more than soccer. A lot of people are taking a particular interest in this match."

The South and North last played in October 1990 in a two-match series in Pyongyang and Seoul that ended with one victory each and honour even.

Since then, fortunes have diverged and the South has gone on to become a leading force in Asian soccer while North Korea has fallen

behind.

Paradoxically, it was the North who first made an impact in international soccer, reaching the last eight in the 1966 World Cup in England and burying Italy along the way.

More recently, the successes have all belonged to the South, culminating in the run to the semi-finals of this year's World Cup staged jointly in South Korea and Japan.

The football friendly is unlikely to be one-sided, however. The team's are essentially under-23 sides preparing for the soccer tournament at the Asian Games.

The South were planning to field few of the World Cup 2002 stars but that changed when the North submitted their squad on Tuesday and included a handful of wild cards -- over age players legally permitted to play.

Park Hang-Seo, the South Korean coach who replaced World Cup hero Guus Hiddink, was sufficiently impressed to add five World Cup wild cards to the squad.

Park says he is impressed with the recent form of the North, following a 3-1 win last week over Thailand in Pyongyang and victory in a four-nation tournament in Shanghai earlier this year.

That followed victory in the 2001 King's Cup football tournament in Thailand.

North Korea coach Li Jong-Man, who took over in September 2000, was given a free hand to bring in newcomers to the squad and appears to have benefitted from a change of sports policy in the North favouring soccer.

North Korea is investing more resources into the sport, and earlier this year sent the national squad to Cyprus in the Mediterranean for winter training.

Among Northern players to watch are Chon Chol, the team's star striker, Lim Man-Chol, the captain and key defender, goalkeeper Jang Jung-Hyuk, and playmaker Jon Young-Chul.

"North Korean football, dominant in Asia in the 1960s, is coming back strong," said a (South) Korea Football Association official.

South Korea's squad is bolstered by World Cup heroes Lee Woon-Jai, in goal, defender Yoo Sang-Chul and Choi-Jin-Chul, and midfielders Kim Nam-Il and Lee Young-Pyo.

South Korea's passion for their soccer team will be complicated on Saturday by the equally passionate drive for unification of the two rival states divided by their Cold War

frontier bristling with weapons.

The Seoul city government has decided to ban the type of mass street gathering that saw crowds of more than two million fans in central Seoul during the World Cup.

The fear is that leftist groups waiving banned North Korea flags could turn the gatherings into political flashpoints.

If that happens, "this whole project will backfire ..." said a government official.

Both North and South teams have agreed not to use their national flags and anthems for the friendly football match and instead will fly new flags featuring a sky blue image of the undivided Korean peninsula on a white background.

Despite tentative efforts at reconciliation, the two Koreas are still technically at war from their 1950-53 conflict.

North Korea boycotted the World Cup staged in South Korea and Japan in June and would not answer an offer to stage matches.

However, recent signs of a thaw have emerged, including North Korea's agreement to send a delegation to the Asian Games, talks between North Korea and Japan, and the resumption of cross border talks between North and South.



TURN SOUTH! Booters of the North Korean national team training at Seoul's World Cup Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP