



PHOTO: AFP

THE MATCH WON'T BE A STROLL IN THE PARK! A national team security personnel(C) walks with French stars (L to R) Fabien Barthez, Zinedine Zidane, Bruno Cheyrou and Daniel Moreira at their training base in Clairefontaine on October 10.

Santini's work cut out



AFP, Paris

France coach Jacques Santini ought to be the envy of many a coach setting out on the winding road to the European Championship finals in Portugal in two years time.

But to listen to the man who led Lyon to the French league title in May - which now seems an eternity ago for both him and French football - a different impression can emerge.

France, as the defending continental champions, ought to walk into the finals if not necessarily emulate their 2000 success.

But time waits for no man and for Santini the sands of time comprise a large fly in his ointment. Those sands started to run out for 'Les Bleus' at an alarming rate at the World Cup four months ago when a team which had ruled the international footballing world for four years crashed out goalless after a dire opening phase.

The golden generation of 1998-2000 appeared distinctly past its sell-by date in Asia and Santini, having replaced the sacked Roger Lemerre, now has to bring in the new without succumbing to the temptation of throwing out the old without premature abandon.

Santini has taken on the task with gusto, but come Saturday night at the Stade de France delegation will be the order of the day, which is where skipper Marcel Desailly

comes in.

Desailly will be in the spotlight for two reasons.

First of all, the 34-year-old Chelsea defender expects to win his 100th cap - leaving him just three behind former skipper Didier Deschamps, who retired after delivering first the World Cup then the European Championship.

But secondly, the Ghanaian-born star cannot go on for ever and Santini is therefore rushing to blood his successor, one of whom will partner him on Saturday.

Chelsea teammate William Gallas could make his debut at the age of 25 but Philippe Mexes of Auxerre is, at 20, the big hope for the future in defence.

"There are one or two bits of fine-tuning to do in a couple of positions," Santini admitted Thursday, adding that he had every faith in his new generation, which includes Lens' untried forward Daniel Moreira in the injury absence both of Juventus striker David Trezeguet and Auxerre's Olivier Kapo.

Liverpool midfielder Bruno Cheyrou is another new face while Lyon sharpshooter Sidney Govou is a Santini protege although Arsenal pair Thierry Henry and Sylvain Wiltord, who bagged a spectacular winner against Cyprus, are expected to start in attack.

Meanwhile, talismanic Zinedine Zidane, whose injury problems at the World Cup were symbolic of his country's lame performance, said he was raring to go, despite some criticism of his performance in

Cyprus.

"I thought the criticism was a bit harsh," said Zidane, who was barely finished with pre-season training for Real Madrid at that stage.

Recognising that French fans were angry at such a poor World Cup title defence Zidane said: "We have to show them they must support the team, not boo it. We can't always win. Coming back to the Stade de France can help us find our game once more," he forecast.

The return of keeper Fabien Barthez, who missed the Cyprus game with hip trouble, should calm a defence which has looked wobbly relative to the watertight version which conceded a record low of two goals on the way to the 1998 World Cup success.

The 1998 team backbone remains in place in the persons of Desailly, Zidane and Barthez.

But with Mexes and Govou breaking through and Henry and Wiltord in their prime last summer's nightmare should, like an occasional poor French grape harvest, turn out to be more the exception than the rule.

Mexes insists the new kids on the block will be ready when the call comes.

"A team cannot go 10 years without making changes. There comes a time for new faces and the coach has taken a good look."

Fortunately for Santini a youthful crop looks to be coming to the boil and for the French hope springs, if not eternal, then at least as far as the summer of 2004.

FIXTURES

Euro 2004 fixtures on Saturday:

GROUP 1

France v Slovenia
Malta v Israel

GROUP 2

Denmark v Luxembourg
Romania v Norway

GROUP 3

Moldavia v Czech Republic
Belarus v Austria

GROUP 4

Sweden v Hungary
Poland v Latvia

GROUP 5

Lithuania v Faroe Islands
Iceland v Scotland

GROUP 6

Spain v Northern Ireland
Ukraine v Greece

GROUP 7

Slovakia v England
Macedonia v Turkey

GROUP 8

Andorra v Belgium
Bulgaria v Croatia

GROUP 9

Italy v Yugoslavia
Finland v Azerbaijan

GROUP 10

Albania v Switzerland
Georgia v Russia

No room for hiccups



REUTERS, Paris

These are still early days in the race for the 2004 European Championships, but none of the favorites will want to slip up when many face two qualifying matches over the next few days.

In all, 39 qualifiers are taking place across Europe from Iceland in the north to Turkey in the south. That number would have been 40 but Israel's match with Cyprus has been postponed because of the political instability in the Middle East.

But by next Wednesday the embryonic groups, in which some teams have yet to play a match and the others have only played once, should have a rather more familiar look to them than they have at the moment.

Reigning European champions France have a good chance to chalk up two victories over Slovenia at home and Malta away as new coach Jacques Santini continues with his rebuilding program following France's disappointing World Cup showing.

France opened their campaign with a 2-1 win in Cyprus a month ago, and with Slovenia winning their

opener 3-0 against Malta, Saturday's match in Paris will give both teams a tougher test.

France then travel to Malta for next Wednesday's match and by then could be top of the Group One table - although they will have to do that without David Trezeguet who pulled out of the squad with an injury on Tuesday. He has been replaced by uncapped Lens striker Daniel Moreira.

Germany meet Bosnia in a friendly on Friday before taking part in what is likely to be one of the most mismatched European internationals of the year when they play the Faroe Islands in Hannover next Wednesday.

The Faeroes sprang a huge upset when they raced into a 2-0 lead against Scotland last month before emerging with a highly creditable 2-2 draw.

However to do the same against the beaten World Cup finalists is a task too far and Germany should win their Group Five match with several goals to spare.

Defenders Christian Woerns and Marko Rehmer have both recovered from injuries and are recalled to the German squad who opened their campaign with a 2-0 win over Lithuania a month ago.

Turkey, the second-best European team in the World Cup,

began their Group Seven campaign with a 3-0 win over Slovakia and can consolidate their good start with wins over both Macedonia and minnows Liechtenstein in the next few days.

Turkey coach Senol Gunes said recently despite the improvements his team has made recently, they are "still not at the highest level" and must work hard to maintain their momentum.

They go into the two games without their talisman and skipper Hakan Sukur but should still be too strong for both opponents.

Among the other fancied teams expected to reach the 2004 finals, England travel to Bratislava for a first meeting with Slovakia without Arsenal defender Sol Campbell, sidelined with a stomach bug, and his Manchester United partner Rio Ferdinand.

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson is likely to replace them with the Middlesbrough duo of Gareth Southgate and Ugo Ehiogu, at least for the visit to Slovakia for the other match in Group Seven.

Campbell could yet recover for England's match next Wednesday against Macedonia at Southampton, but Ferdinand, who has had an operation on an injured knee will not be fit in time.

Italy, runners-up to France in

Euro 2000 and looking to do well in this tournament after their disappointing second round World Cup exit, play Yugoslavia in their home Group Nine match without injured forward Francesco Totti, who has thigh and knee problems.

He is also likely to miss the visit to Cardiff for next Wednesday's match against a resurgent Welsh team who started their campaign with a 2-0 win in Finland and have now gone six matches without defeat.

Other highlights see 1996 runners-up the Czech Republic travel to Moldova in Group 3, where Belarus host Austria, Belgium tackle Group 8 minnows Andorra and Bulgaria host Croatia in the same group.

Scotland, who have the mammoth task of getting past the Germans under their German coach Bert Vogts, will bid to improve on a disastrous start - a draw against the Faroe Islands - by winning in Iceland.

Anything less and Vogts will come under enormous pressure even if the Icelanders are now above 63rd-ranked Scotland in the FIFA rankings.

Not falling into attacking Trap!



AFP, Naples

Calls for demanding Italian media for a more attacking attitude from the national side have fallen on deaf ears ahead of Saturday's 2004 European championship qualifier here at Napoli's San Paolo stadium.

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni was pilloried by the local press for not adopting a more adventurous approach at this summer's World Cup at which Italy crashed out in the second round.

But despite their ignominious failure in the Far East against co-hosts South Korea, 'Trap', as he is known to the Italian public, refuses to change his strategy and is stick-



GIOVANNI TRAPATTONI

ing to a 4-4-2 formation against the Yugoslavs.

"I have always fielded an offensive line-up with two strikers but now the press is pushing me to throw on even more attack-minded players," said the exasperated 63-year old at the team's Coverciano training camp near Florence.

Using two forwards may not be seen as evidence of a negative philosophy but Trapattoni insists on playing one striker in a more withdrawn role just in front of a midfield quartet.

This often leaves the out-and-out striker starved of support when in the opponents' half and can result in fewer goals.

Italy scored just five in four matches in Asia (one in extra-time against South Korea), a poor return from a squad boasting Christian Vieri, Alessandro Del Piero and Filippo Inzaghi.

But Trap refuses to back down on his choice of tactics to satisfy the

country's press pack.

"Pay attention," he demanded of reporters at Coverciano. "At club level players are always ready to make sacrifices."

"But as soon as that happens in the national side it becomes a scandal. Everybody asks: Why did he play out of position?"

"Real Madrid can play this way because they have Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and Raul who can all track back and take a deeper role," he explained.

"Even Milan have only one real striker in 'Pippo' Inzaghi."

'Trap' was referring to the press' outrage at his decision to move Juventus' Matteo Brihi out wide from his usual midfield role during Italy's friendly outing against Slovenia earlier this year.

There could be another change with AC Milan prodigy Andrea Pirlo replacing the injured Francesco Totti behind the front two in the 'trequartista' midfield role.

It's a position he held for many years in the under-21 squad before he was used as a defensive midfielder.

"Pirlo is making his mark at Milan in a deeper role," said Trap. "I don't want to ruin all that good work, but I doubt he has suddenly forgotten how to play as a trequartista."

Trapattoni has been keeping a watchful eye on the Yugoslavs, coached by former Milan idol Dejan Savicevic.

"I have examined tapes of their recent games over and over again," said Trapattoni.

"Let us be wary. Italian football is going through a strong patch at the moment, but so are the Slav teams." Savicevic, who earned the moniker 'Il Genio' while playing for AC Milan in the 1990s for his brilliance on the ball, said he was expecting a tough encounter in Naples.

"In our group we must face many good opponents and Italy are the strongest," he said.

"I'm fairly optimistic for the match in Naples. I know the Italian team well. They have many strong points and few weaknesses. We know it won't be easy to get a good result but qualification is not out of reach."

Four days after the match against Yugoslavia, Italy, who won their first Group Nine match 2-0 against Azerbaijan, travel to Cardiff to face Wales at the Millennium stadium.

Time to look ahead



AFP, Bratislava

After nearly four months of thinking what might have been, England will try to lay their World Cup ghosts to rest here on Saturday.

Overcoming Slovakia in their opening Euro 2004 qualifier is the number one priority for Sven-Goran Eriksson's young squad.

But there is more than just the three points at stake for an England side anxious to prove that this summer's World Cup quarter-final defeat by Brazil was not the result of a critical failure of nerve.

Having fallen behind to Michael Owen's goal, Brazil came back to take the lead and then held on with 10 men after Ronaldinho was sent off.

That the Brazilians then went on

to win a tournament prematurely deprived of some of its most potent forces has only served to make the memory of that broiling afternoon in Shizuoka all the more painful in English minds.

"That could have been us' is clearly a thought that crossed the mind of England's captain, David Beckham, on more than one occasion over the summer.

"The way we played and the way we were performing, it was a missed chance," he said. "But we have to forget that now. It's all in the past."

With Steven Gerrard, Michael Owen and Rio Ferdinand still in their early 20's, England can confidently expect to at least maintain their current standing in world football for some time to come.

But for Beckham, now 27, the European Championship finals in Portugal in two years time might be his best shot at winning a major prize with England.

"It would be nice to give the fans

a little bit more than reaching the quarter-final and getting all excited and then having the down period," he said.

Beckham is quick to dismiss suggestions that, when it comes to playing the countries with the pedigree of an Italy or a Brazil, England's players do not have the necessary confidence in their ability to beat them.

"We are a young team and self belief does build over time but I think we have a level at the moment which is good."

Eriksson has been singing from a remarkably similar hymn sheet this week. France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Holland and Turkey, who England have to face in their group, will all be contenders, the Swede acknowledges. But he is confident England also belong in that group of favourites.

"To say 'we should win it' is very difficult but we are one of the teams that could do it," Eriksson said.

The popularity of the Premiership around the world exacerbates an English tendency to confuse world famous with world class. But there is little doubt that Eriksson has enviable resources.

The squad that went to Japan has been bolstered by the return of Gerrard and Manchester United fullback Gary Neville from the injuries that kept them out of the World Cup.

Gerrard is expected to start alongside Nicky Butt in the middle of midfield with Beckham, fully recovered from a calf strain, on the right and Paul Scholes in the troublesome slot on the left.

Although surgery (Rio Ferdinand) and a dose of gastroenteritis (Sol Campbell) have conspired to rob Eriksson of his first choice central defence, that is one area where England have genuine strength in depth.

Middlesbrough duo Gareth Southgate and Ugo Ehiogu are expected to fill the gap on Saturday and could be retained for next Wednesday's match with Macedonia should Campbell not recover by Sunday.

By a twist of fate, their main task on Saturday will be containing their club-mate Sziard Nemeth, who has scored three goals in the Premiership this season to help Middlesbrough into third place.

Nemeth was left out of the 3-0 defeat by Turkey in Slovakia's opening qualifier but is expected to return for a match the home side can ill afford to lose.

"We played very badly against Turkey and England is a big, big test for us," Nemeth acknowledged.

But he is still determined to put one over on his adopted country, joking: "I want to apologise in advance if I score."

Ronaldo too heavy?



Football

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian superstar Ronaldo said his knees are in excellent shape and rumours of weight gain had been exaggerated, it was revealed on Spanish radio on Friday.

The Real Madrid striker also confirmed he would stop receiving salary payments should he get injured again, having already had knee operations at the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000.

"My knees are the best part of me," the former Inter Milan player, twice FIFA World Player of the Year, told radio station Cadena Ser.

And on his weight, he added: "I am not yet at my best weight, I weigh 87 kilos, I weight

1kg more than at the World Cup. 86 kilos is ideal."

A Spanish newspaper had said on Thursday that the superstar refuses to be weighed by Real Madrid's medical personnel.

With reports suggesting that the striker is overweight, the leading daily El Pais said that whenever he

is asked to go on the scales, he replies with a joke and is let off.

The paper suggested that Ronaldo, who weighs in officially at 82 kilograms (180.78 pounds), is



RONALDO

unwilling to weigh himself due to a fondness for fizzy drinks and food in general.

"It's not that Ronaldo is fat, because he isn't. It's just that he is not physically fit," the newspaper quoted an unnamed club doctor as saying.

The sports daily As said

Thursday that Madrid had advised the 26-year-old to continue a regime of double training sessions to shed more weight.

The suggestions that the world's most famous striker is a little chubby contrast with comments made by Madrid's sports director Jorge Valdano a month ago.

"He is built like a suit of armour," Valdano said after having greeted the club's new signing with an embrace.

The Brazilian, who has been working on regaining his fitness since he joined Madrid from Inter Milan for 45 million euros (US dollars 44 million), has played 74 minutes so far for the club.

His brilliant debut Sunday, in which he came on as a 64th-minute substitute to score two goals in a 5-2 win over Alaves, was followed by a quieter display in Madrid's 1-1 draw at Real Betis two days later.

"I'm still only 80 percent fit," Ronaldo said after his second appearance Tuesday.

Ronaldo's next game is expected to be Madrid's away league match against Racing de Santander on Oct. 19.

England Batistuta's last stop



Football

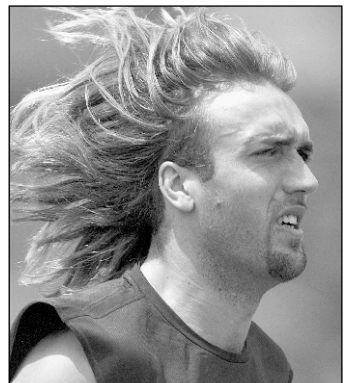
REUTERS, Rome

Striker Gabriel Batistuta aims to finish his career in England after his contract with AS Roma ends, the Argentine player was quoted as saying on Friday.

"I don't know if it will happen next year or in two years' time, but I'll go to play in England for sure," he told sports daily Corriere dello Sport.

Asked whether he would like to join Claudio Ranieri's Italian contingent at Chelsea, the striker joked: "I don't know. I'm going there to speak English. With him I'd always be speaking Italian."

Batistuta's contract with Roma expires at the end of this season but



GABRIEL BATISTUTA

could be renewed on a year-by-year basis. Rumours of him moving to England have been circulating for some time, but the player didn't give a clue about which club he could join.

It has been a difficult 12 months in Italy for Batistuta.

His total of 180 goals make him the second-highest goalscorer playing in Serie A after Roberto Baggio, but a tally of just six goals last season left many wondering whether - at the age of 33 - the Argentine had finally passed his best.

He has yet to open his account in European competition for Roma and he had to come off the bench to score the second goal in Roma's 4-1 win over Udinese at the weekend.

"Let's get it straight. In Serie A I've played a game and a half and I've scored two goals. In the Champions League I haven't played two whole matches. Therefore it doesn't seem to be so disastrous to me," he said.

Exeter give up on Gazza

AFP, London

English Third Division strugglers Exeter City have ended their attempts to bring in Paul Gascoigne as a player-coach.

Former England midfielder Gascoigne was due to see officials from the south-west club on Thursday but the meeting was cancelled.

And Exeter chairman John Russell said: "We will now be exploring other avenues."

"We have had 61 enquiries about the vacant manager's post and we will now be honing them down to 17 good applicants and phoning those people this afternoon to try and arrange interviews as quickly as possible."

Exeter are looking for a new manager after sacking John Cornforth.

Gascoigne, whose career highlight was reaching the 1990 World Cup semi-final with England, played in the First Division for Burnley last season.

He trained in America with DC United during the summer but a permanent move fell through.

Reflective Luciano



Football

REUTERS, Rome

Chievo's Brazilian winger Luciano has mixed feelings after receiving a seven-month suspension from the Italian Football League's disciplinary commission on Wednesday for playing under an assumed name.

"I was expecting a lighter penalty," he was quoted as saying in sports daily Corriere dello Sport on Friday. "Considering the request of the vice-attorney (for a two-year ban), however, it could have turned out much worse."

"I think seven months is still too long. Unfortunately I had no choice. To make a better future, to get out of a difficult situation, I had to do what I did."

The winger, registered last season as Da Conceicao Silva Eriberto, admitted a month ago that he took up his false name in 1996 to

win a place at Brazilian club Palmeiras, claiming he was 16-years-old when in fact he was 20.

Two seasons later he joined Italian club Bologna and then moved on to Chievo where he was part of the Verona club's successful debut in Serie A last season.

He credited his wife, Rachele,

with persuading him to take the decision to reveal his true identity.

Asked what exactly his wife had said to him, he answered: "That the moment had arrived to stop calling my son by a name that didn't belong to him. That it was time to sort my position out and give my family and I a calmer future."

His priority now, he said, was to be ready to win back his position in the Chievo team as soon as his suspension ends.

Club president Luca Campedelli was less pleased with the ban, which also resulted in the club being fined 75,000 euros for indirect responsibility in Luciano's deception.

"If this is the