

Becks in total control!



AFP, Cagliari

David Beckham has insisted he is in a fit mental state to captain England, despite his recent red card against Murcia, Real Madrid's disappointing season and the allegations surrounding his private life.

"I'm totally in control," he said at the England training camp ahead of the Euro 2004 championships which gets underway in Portugal on June 12.

A turbulent few weeks for the England captain in which he has seen Real fail to win a single trophy and his marriage scrutinised following accusations of infidelity culminated with his sending off in the penultimate game of the Spanish season for abusing a linesman.

His fury as he screamed at the official evoked memories of the petulant Beckham who was sent off against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup for flicking out a heel at Diego Simeone, but the 29-year-old insists those days are long behind him.

"People have said that the red mist is back and I'm back to the days of that game against Argentina.

"Sometimes you're so frustrated and tense that those things happen and that's been the case because we really haven't played our best football in the late stage of the season.

"I'd heard players saying the offending phrase to the linesman and the referee just before, but maybe it sounded more aggressive coming from me."

Yet events before Beckham's press conference at England's training camp in Sardinia hardly suggested a player in control of his emotions.

Upset by media coverage of his

alleged affairs, Beckham had already imposed a ban on speaking to BBC News, ITN News and Sky TV, but on Tuesday attempted - fruitlessly - to extend that sanction to include the Daily Mail - which he branded 'a disgrace' - and the News of the World.

Nonetheless, when he did finally appear, he was as polite as ever, even if there was a constant sense of imposed control.

After a promising start to the season, Beckham has seen his dreams of a treble of Champions League, Spanish league and Spanish Cup crumble as Real's form deteriorated to the extent that they lost their final five games of the season.

"People keep saying this has been a disappointing season, but I personally have enjoyed it," Beckham admitted.

"I've enjoyed my time at Real Madrid. Whatever rumours there were about me coming back to England, they weren't started by me. I've had to prove to people that I could play football and not just to sell shirts."

Whether he has been a success in the central midfield role he has adopted in Madrid is open to debate, but he acknowledged he is highly unlikely to play anywhere other than on his more accustomed right flank in Euro 2004, with his former Manchester United teammate Nicky Butt taking up the anchor role in England's midfield diamond.

"I think you always need players like Nicky Butt in the side," he said, before looking ahead to England's opening game of the tournament against reigning champions France.

"When you read through the France squad it's actually quite frightening. We've got a strong squad, but we need someone who can win the ball in midfield. Nicky Butt's definitely that player."

However Owen, who had a mixed season himself scoring 15 goals in 28 Premiership appearances, indicated that the choice of who would replace the Frenchman could play a part in his deciding whether to accept a new contract or to leave.

"I am intrigued to see who the manager is, but also the whole package," said Owen, who was speaking from England's training camp as they prepare for the Euro 2004 championships which gets underway on June 12.

"I would love to see improvement

being built, which is right for the club. It sounds like you are holding everyone to ransom but I am not. I just want to be playing in a top team."

While Owen accepted that finishing fourth in the Premiership and scraping into the last Champions League spot was not good enough he still said he felt sad

for Houllier, under whom he won the FA Cup, League Cup and UEFA Cup.

"We had six great years," said Owen. "I haven't got a bad word to say about him.

"I don't really want to say whether it is right or wrong but you always get that sad feeling, that sick feeling in your stomach, when you see someone you know going through a bad experience.

"Gerard Houllier joined Liverpool after the 1998 World Cup, so most of my career has been under him.

"He's seen me grow as a player, he's worked on different things and I would like to think I am a better all-round player as a result.

"He's just about the only manager I have known so I don't know different at the moment."

Valencia coach Rafael Benitez, Porto boss Jose Mourinho, who is also linked with Chelsea, Alan Curbishley and Gordon Strachan are the names in the frame for the Liverpool hotseat and will be expected to deliver their first ever Premiership title and first championship since 1990.

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"We have nothing to lose... we want to offer the Portuguese a great fight," Rehhagel told a news conference before his squad leaves Greece for the June 12-14 July 4 finals.

Rehhagel, 65, steered Greece to a surprise top spot in their Euro 2004 Group and to their first participation in European football finals in 24 years.

But he avoided raising expectations on his team's chances in Portugal.

"We hope to be an adequate opponent in the three games... we play against extraordinarily good teams," Rehhagel said.

Greece's group rivals are hosts



PHOTO: AFP
Brazil's Ronaldo (L) vies with Lopo (R) during a friendly football match against Catalonia National Team at Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Tuesday.

Shell-shocked Owen



AFP, Cagliari

The removal of Gerard Houllier as Liverpool manager left England striker Michael Owen feeling sick in the stomach the player confessed here on Tuesday.

The 24-year-old said he was upset Houllier had been dismissed after a six-year term as he was the only manager he had really ever known at the club.

However Owen, who had a mixed season himself scoring 15 goals in 28 Premiership appearances, indicated that the choice of who would replace the Frenchman could play a part in his deciding whether to accept a new contract or to leave.

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Barca cut Dutch connection



AFP, Barcelona

Spanish title runners-up Barcelona are to sell Dutch international striker Patrick Kluyvert and winger Marc Overmars as well as release on free transfers their compatriots Philip Cocu and Michael Reiziger the club revealed on Tuesday.

Their departures will virtually signal the end of the days of when the club was called 'Ajax Barcelona' because of the number of Dutch players mainly from Ajax brought in by then manager Louis van Gaal.

The only Dutchmen remaining at the club will be Giovanni van Bronckhorst, who Barca bought from Arsenal on Tuesday after a successful season long loan, and manager Frank Rijkaard.

Cocu's departure is the most surprising of the four as he was skipper of the side and had played more than 200 matches for the club scoring 31 goals in his seven year stint.

However the 33-year-old PSV Eindhoven target rejected the Catalan giants offer of renewing his contract with the same salary but

with an increase in his bonuses.

The departure of Kluyvert is less of a surprise as he had been a peripheral figure this term as Barca revived under Rijkaard to finish second and delight in bitter rivals Real Madrid's decline into fourth place.

However the 27-year-old Champions League winner with Ajax in 1996 - and like Cocu at Barca since 1998 - was relegated to the substitutes bench and regularly hinted at his unhappiness and his wish to move to the Premiership.

Kluyvert, scorer of 90 goals in his 181 appearances for the club, had become a target for the fans, who thought he preferred to give priority to running his trendy bar in the city than to the club's fortunes.

Kluyvert still has a year to run on his contract and his wage demands may prove a problem for a buying club.

Reiziger too may head to the British Isles, though it could be to Scotland instead of England as he has received offers from both countries.

The 31-year-old's departure after 173 appearances, failing to score once, for Barca was inevitable after the signing of Brazilian international fullback Belletti from UEFA Cup semi-

finalists Villarreal.

Overmars has rarely threatened to live up to his predecessor in the wide man role Luis Figo, who he was bought from Arsenal to replace when the Portuguese star signed for Real Madrid in 2000, but the 32-year-old's performances have been so poor this season that his advancing years and diminishing value will make it difficult to sell him.

Shevchenko Milan's

AFP, Milan

Ukraine striker Andrei Shevchenko, wanted by big-spending English Premiership side Chelsea, has signed a new four-year deal with AC Milan that will keep him in Italy to 2009.

The 27-year-old, whose previous contract ran out in 2005, was top scorer in the Italian championship last season.

It was the second snub for Chelsea in a week, Roma's Argentina defender Walter Samuel preferring Real Madrid to a move to London.

Brazil win friendly

AFP, Barcelona

Ronaldo scored twice to help Brazil beat a Catalan XI 5-3 in a friendly match played here at the Nou Camp on Tuesday.

Scores: Brazil 5 (Ronaldo 17, 37, Ricardo Oliveira 52, Julio Baptista 63, 90)

Catalonia XI 2 (Gerard 75, Sergi Garcia 89)

Portugal restores border controls

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal restored border controls on Tuesday night as part of security measures for next month's Euro 2004 football championships.

Border controls had been removed in 1991 under the Schengen agreement which allows people to travel without checks from country to country.

Under the new arrangements visitors will not be stopped at border gates but mobile units will carry out random identity checks, the Interior Ministry said.

Man made for Utd



AFP, London

Ruud van Nistelrooy wants to end his playing days at English Premiership giants Manchester United -- and then get out of football altogether.

The Netherlands hitman, under contract at Old Trafford until 2008, had previously said he wanted to see out his career at PSV Eindhoven, where he made his name before moving to Manchester.

But following discussions with United boss Alex Ferguson, the 27-year-old only has ambitions at Old Trafford.

"When I signed my new contract recently, I didn't only sign for the money," van Nistelrooy told British daily The Sun.

"I had a long talk with Alex Ferguson where he explained his future plans. His ambition is to win the Champions League again and I'm very proud that I can work on that with him. I agreed with his vision," he said.

"It was very simple then to sign my new contract the next day."

Van Nistelrooy had previously intimated a return to the Netherlands and PSV, where he struck 57 goals in 67 league

matches.

But less than three weeks ahead of representing his country at Euro 2004, the forward revealed the attitude of Dutch supporters made him change his mind.

"I used to think that after my time at Manchester United I'd have a couple more years back home in Holland with PSV Eindhoven again. But I don't think like that any more," he said.

"When I stop playing, I will quit the game for good and never come back into football. I never want to be a manager. I think I have a lovely life but when I stop that will be it.

"I watch Dutch games on television and the public are very negative.

"I hate that mentality and that is the reason it will be all over in 2008. I finish my career in Manchester."

But the 30-times capped striker hinted that if his form drops, United might show him the exit door -- something he entirely understands.

"I know when I'm playing badly they will have another player to come in for me.

"But you don't complain, you just shake hands and leave. That is the reality. It is the same for everyone.

"This club is bigger than any one player."

Liverpool deal by July

AFP, Bangkok

English football giants Liverpool have agreed to sell Thailand a 30 percent stake in the club but final signing of the deal may be delayed until July, Thai officials said Wednesday.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said the ultimate decision on whether the kingdom buys into one of the world's most famous clubs would not be made for another five weeks at least, to allow Thailand to conduct due diligence.

"After five or six weeks there will be a conclusion either way and the issue would be finished," Thaksin told reporters.

Thai deputy commerce minister Pongsak Raktapongpaisarn said a final decision on whether to go ahead with the deal now rested with Thailand after Liverpool accepted demands set out by Thaksin.

Rehhagel's warning



AFP, Athens

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Vassell boost for Eriksson



AFP, Cagliari

England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson said Tuesday that Darius Vassell is on course to be fit for Euro 2004.

Physio Gary Lewin has been taking the Aston Villa striker through light training sessions to shake off a hamstring problem at England's training camp in Sardinia.

The news is a setback for in-form Tottenham forward Jermain Defoe, who is on standby should Vassell or any other member of Eriksson's squad not make the trip to Portugal.

"Vassell is going to make one more session with the physio on Wednesday and then he should be ready to train on Thursday," said Eriksson.

"As our situation is today, we don't have any big problems. I think that Vassell will make it, but we have three weeks and two games to get through yet."

Some of Eriksson's stars have only just finished the domestic season, such as Manchester United players Gary Neville, Nicky Butt and Paul Scholes, who played in Saturday's FA Cup final win over Millwall.

But the Swedish coach is happy that his players have had at least a week to recover, unlike the prepa-

rations for the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea.

"If you compare now with how it was before the World Cup, this time it's much better. Saying that, you know how football is and things can happen," he said.

"I feel much better as, just days before we met up for the World Cup, we had Gary Neville and Steven Gerrard ruled out. That gives you a knock.

"We don't have any major problems. Most of the players got one week off before we started this preparation, which they didn't have before the World Cup.

Voller calls up Ziege

AFP, Berlin

Tottenham Hotspur defender Christian Ziege has been called into the German squad for the 2004 European championships after SV Hamburg defender Christian Rahn was ruled out through injury.

Rahn, 24, struggled to shake off a nagging injury sustained in March and German national coach Voller has called up the experienced Ziege in his place.

Euro 96 winner Ziege, capped 71 times by his country, has struggled to win a place in the Tottenham team this season and the 32-year-old is looking for a new club for next season.

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PHOTO: AFP
Zinedine Zidane (L) fights for ball with fellow midfielder Robert Pires during France's training session in La Grande Motte on Tuesday.

Les Blues keen to avoid WC debacle



AFP, Paris

France will be looking to put up a far more resolute defence of their crown in Euro 2004 than the fiasco that surrounded their meek surrender of the World Cup two years ago when they crashed out in the first round.

Under Jacques Santini, who replaced the hapless Roger Lemerre, the French cruised through their qualifiers.

However while most pundits would see them and England progressing smoothly from a group that includes Switzerland and Croatia, France's experience of the 2002 World Cup when they lost to Senegal in the opening match should serve as a warning to the players.

France open their campaign with the potential table-topper decider

with England and a draw would probably suit both of them as defeat would leave the nerves tingling as they approach the next two matches.

Santini, though, is refusing to look that far ahead and has told his players not to be obsessed by the England clash where they will come face to face with a lot of the players they face each week in the Premiership.

"This will be a very special match with many players from the same club, so it will be strange for some of them," said the former French international, who cut his managerial teeth with Lyon.

"But we must not get fixated on this match and it would be a mistake to read too much into it."

However in a fallback to the 2002 debacle, Santini will have been concerned to hear that his star player Zinedine Zidane is like the rest of his Real Madrid teammates complaining of fatigue which was a common complaint among the French side in the World Cup.

France are not the only team with something to prove.

England as ever go in with huge expectations on them and with all the speculation over Sven-Goran Eriksson's future seemingly over, the Swede believes that his side can go on and win their first tournament since the 1966 World Cup.

"If they (the players) are fit I think so, yes, they can win.

"You need a bit of luck to win a big tournament and I hope we have that luck."

Eriksson based his confidence on the fact that a large part of the squad had been with him at the 2002 World Cup where they went out in the quarter-finals to Brazil, whose coach Luis Felipe Scolari is now in charge of hosts Portugal.

"A lot of them are the same (as in the World Cup squad) with two more years' experience which is important and those who were in Japan and still in the squad should be better.

"I am happy with the balance. Hopefully, they will stay fit and if they

stay fit I think we will have a very, very good team."

Of prime concern to England fans will be the fitness, mental and physical, of captain David Beckham, another to suffer the Real Madrid malaise towards the end of the season culminating in his being sent-off in the penultimate league match.

However the unfappable Swede said he wasn't worried in the slightest about his playmaker in chief.

"He (Beckham) had some difficult times that's for sure and I saw the game when he was sent off but I have always said that when he puts on the England shirt he will do an excellent job as he always does and will put away what has happened lately."

While France and England can at least approach the finals in a fairly optimistic frame of mind the same cannot be said of Germany, though the manner in which they stumbled through to the 2002 World Cup final may encourage them to think they can repeat that feat.

However in a group consisting of

old rivals Holland and dark horses the Czech Republic, Rudi Voller's men can think of having a longer summer holiday than the other two sides.

Voller said it was the hardest group and that was before his side were at the wrong end of a 5-1 thrashing by a mostly inexperienced Romanian side.

However Voller has kept faith with the majority of the players that lost to Brazil in the World Cup final, despite an alarming slide in form from goalkeeper Oliver Kahn and playmaker Michael Ballack.

"Ballack has not had his best season but he is hungry to give his all," explained the 1990 World Cup winning striker.

"I hope he will be the same player he was at the 2002 World Cup."

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni - who has warned of not taking Germany lightly - will also be hoping to bow out with his team going one better than last time round when they lost to France with a golden goal in extra-time.

With a relatively easy group

including the two Scandinavian sides Denmark and Sweden along with Bulgaria, Italy should ease through to the quarters but the trouble they had in qualifying should be a caveat on their overall chances.

As for the great underachievers of European and world football Spain and neighbours Portugal it should really be time to step up to the plate.

Spain coach Inaki Saez has opted for a squad heavier on defense than creative talent and with striker Raul another to have fallen away with Real Madrid this term it may be time at last for his understudy at club and international level Fernando Morientes to grab the limelight.

For Portugal it will be probably the last time that the so-called golden era of players, who won the world youth cup, can hope to land a major senior trophy but a series of disappointing friendly results has lowered Scolari's ambitions.

"If we reached the semifinals I would be reasonably happy. To win against Greece (in the opening match) is vital," he said.