



England captain John Terry (L) leads his players as they take part in a training session at Carrington, Manchester on Wednesday.

Mood light in England camp

Football

AFP, London

Steven Gerrard believes England will benefit from the light-hearted atmosphere encouraged by new coach Steve McClaren.

Liverpool midfielder Gerrard revealed the England squad enjoyed a trip to a comedy club this week as part of McClaren's attempt to foster an improved team spirit among his players.

McClaren's men start their bid to reach the Euro 2008 finals when they take on Andorra at Old Trafford on Saturday before a trip to Macedonia next Wednesday.

And Gerrard admitted the club-style camaraderie being built by

McClaren and his assistant Terry Venables should stand England in good stead as they try to bounce back from the disappointment of their World Cup quarterfinal exit against Portugal.

Gerrard said: "We went to a comedy place and had a few comedians who were fantastic. They got us giggling and that helps to bring the boys together."

"The manager wants to have a club feel around the squad and hopefully we will see the benefit of that."

"It's nice to relax and then we can concentrate on the fixtures we've got coming up."

"First impressions of the new set-up is that everything is fresh and everyone is enjoying it, but we will be always be judged by results."

Although England qualified for every major tournament under former coach Sven Goran Eriksson, there was a feeling among fans and experts that the team never fulfilled their potential.

Gerrard, who should win his 50th cap against Macedonia next week, was one of those players who has struggled to reproduce his swashbuckling club displays in an England shirt.

But McClaren has handed Gerrard a license to attack more now and the Anfield skipper says that underlines his determination to win with style rather than just grind out results.

The first signs of the change bearing fruit came in the recent 4-0 friendly win over Greece and Gerrard said: "I really enjoyed the

role the manager gave me against Greece. We absolutely destroyed them."

"It's a similar role to the way I've played for my club. I had the shackles off and was able to get into the box."

"It would be nice to build on the performance against Greece. The manager has told me he will use me in different roles depending on the opposition but he wants more performances like I've had for my club."

"The most important thing is to qualify but we know the fans have been frustrated by some of our performances."

"It's important to win with style and that's what Steve is trying to do. Hopefully that will come out on the pitch."

Ballack pays the penalty

AFP, Berlin

German international captain Michael Ballack has been ordered to pay a 70,000-euro (90,000 dollars) fine for failing to declare goods he bought in Dubai, Landshut district court said Wednesday.

Ballack bought an Italian handbag worth 2,000 euros (2,600 dollars) for his partner Simone in January on returning from a Dubai training camp with former club Bayern Munich, but did not declare the purchase on his arrival at Munich airport.

The 29-year-old Ballack earns a reported 190,000 euros (243,000 dollars) a week at English Premiership champions Chelsea.

Basile plans big

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina's new coach Alfio Basile said he would settle for a 4-0 win over Brazil in his first match in charge on Sunday.

"I would like us to score four goals and then to score none," the gravel-voiced coach told reporters on Wednesday after being asked what he expected from the friendly in London.

Basile, who coached Argentina from 1991 to 1994, officially begins his second stint on Sept. 15 and is still in charge of club side Boca Juniors.

He agreed to lead Argentina against Brazil after the game was arranged at short notice.

"It's always special against Brazil," said Basile at Buenos Aires airport before catching his flight.

"It's not a personal landmark because I've got 800,000 matches behind me, but it's important for the national team."

Basile said he could not comment on whether he would field Corinthians pair Javier Mascherano and Carlos Tevez.

Tevez walked out on the Brazilian club after playing against Botafogo on Aug. 20 while Mascherano, sent off against Gremio on Sunday, skipped training on Tuesday.

"Until I see them and talk to them and watch them practice, I can't say anything," said Basile.

He also shrugged off claims that his forward line lacked height after he picked Sergio Aguero, Tevez, Javier Saviola and Lionel Messi amongst the strikers.

"I like short players," he said.

Egyptian int'l dies

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian international defender Mohammed Abdel Wahab died of a heart attack while training with his club, champions Al-Ahly, on Thursday.

The 22-year-old collapsed on the pitch and was immediately transferred to a nearby hospital but resuscitation efforts failed.

The young defender won all national and continental awards with his Cairo club and was also part of the squad that won the African Cup of Nations in February.

Wahab's death comes three years after Cameroon international midfielder Marc Vivien Foe collapsed and died during a 2003 Confederations Cup semi-final in France.

The 28-year-old Foe's death resulted in FIFA introducing new health measures at the 2006 World Cup where for the first time all the players from the 32 participating nations underwent medical checks for potential heart defects.

Brazil set Swiss date

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

World Cup finals flops Brazil have lined up another friendly which will see them play Switzerland in a friendly on November 15 in Basel it was announced by the Brazilian Football Confederation on Wednesday.

Brazil's new coach Dunga has already seen his side minus several of their established stars draw 1-1 with Norway earlier this month and has lined up two friendlies in England.

He first sees them play bitter rivals and fellow World Cup disappointments Argentina at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium on Saturday and then on Monday they stay in north London to play Wales at Spurs' White Hart Lane ground.

The Swiss friendly is the second one between the two teams this year, they having played one prior to the World Cup finals.

Dunga replaced Carlos Alberto

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Champs get together

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's opening Euro 2008 qualifier against Lithuania in Naples on Saturday promises to be as much a welcome back party for the World Cup winners as a competitive football match.

The Italy team that lost 2-0 to Croatia in Livorno earlier this month was a second-string side, barely recognisable from the one that beat France in the final in Germany on July 9.

This weekend's Group B game at the San Paolo stadium will be different, marking the return of the likes of Fabio Cannavaro, Gianluigi Buffon and Gennaro Gattuso.

That not all the world champi-

ons are back in the squad is due to the late start of the Italian domestic season, which has been delayed until Sept. 9 by legal battles surrounding the Serie A match-fixing scandal.

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni has left out some of his best and most experienced players -- including strikers Luca Toni, Alessandro Del Piero, Francesco Totti and Vincenzo Iaquinta -- who he believes have not yet reached full match fitness.

Alessandro Nesta is out through injury, while fellow defender Marco Materazzi is serving a two-match ban for goading Zinedine Zidane into head-butting him in the World Cup final.

Despite the absences, few fans expect Lithuania to offer much resistance. The last time the two

sides met on Italian soil, in a 2002 World Cup qualifier, Italy were 4-0 winners.

Donadoni, however, wants his team to avoid thinking of the match as merely a warm-up for their second qualifier against France in a World Cup final re-match in Paris on Wednesday.

"We have to be careful against Lithuania. We have to think that they are the world champions, not us, otherwise we will have problems," Donadoni said.

His caution was echoed by Buffon, who insisted that Italy's World Cup win would not make them complacent.

"Being world champions brings with it a big responsibility and everyone will look at us differently. But the experience will help us to stay focused," he said.

Hammers pull off Tevez, Mascherano stunner

THE GUARDIAN



In one of the most surprising transfer deals ever sealed in English football, West Ham have signed coveted Argentina stars Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano - beating off competition from Manchester United, Arsenal, Bayern Munich, AC Milan and Portsmouth.

The pair will join the Hammers from Brazilian club Corinthians on a season-long loan but it could become permanent if all parties are happy, though whether West Ham could afford them is unclear, since both carry price tags in excess of 15 million pounds.

Tevez broke the news of the

transfer on his official website. "Carlos Tevez - along with his former Corinthians teammate, Javier Mascherano, has signed - a contract to play with West Ham United of England," read the statement.

On the surface, the move is nothing short of sensational: never before have two world class players yet to reach their prime - both are only 22 - rejected a host of elite clubs in order to join a middling one. While it true that West Ham are on the up with Alan Pardew at the helm and exciting talents such as Anton Ferdinand, Yossi Benayoun and Nigel Reo-Coker in their ranks, it seems likely that the Argentinian duo's decision was, at least in part, influenced by behind-the-scenes interests.

Corinthians have a 10-year "co-management" deal the Media Sports Investments company, in which Roman Abramovich is said to have a significant holding. It has also been reported that MSI owns the contracts of both players and could therefore block moves to, say, clubs likely to rival Chelsea for domestic or European glory. Another reported shareholder in MSI is Kia Joorabchian, the Iranian-born, London-based businessman who last year expressed an interest in taking over West Ham.

Whatever the reasons behind the move, it is unquestionably a major coup for Alan Pardew and gives last season's FA Cup runners-up one of the most impressive-looking squads in the Premiership.

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Japan head to Saudi Arabia

AFP, Tokyo

Asian champions Japan left Thursday for Saudi Arabia in their bid to retain the Asian Cup, adding under-21 international Shusaku Nishikawa and three other new players to the squad.

A total of 24 players were announced by Japan coach Ivica Osim, who called up midfielders Masahiko Inoha of FC Tokyo, 19-year-old Tsukasa Umesaki of Oita Trinita and Takahiro Futagawa of Gamba Osaka for the first time.

Former Feyenoord midfielder and World Cup player Shinji Ono, and other Europe-based players, including Celtic's Shunsuke Nakamura, Hamburg's Naohiro Takahara and Grenoble's Masashi Oguro, were sidelined.

"I chose these players according to our tactics. I didn't choose them simply after watching yesterday's games in the J-League," said Osim, 65.

"What's important is that our opponents are a strong team who qualified for the World Cup, not that our players will have an experience to play away games."

"We should not be careless against them, because Middle Eastern countries have strong rivalries against Japan," added Osim, who led the former Yugoslavia to the 1990 World Cup quarterfinals.

The three-time Asian Cup winners, who defeated India 6-0 in February and Yemen 2-0 earlier this month, are now joint leaders of Group A on six points with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, also three-time winners of the Asian Cup in 1984, 1988 and 1996, also defeated Yemen 4-0 and India 3-0.

Japan play Saudi Arabia away on September 3, and three days later face Yemen.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi (Jubilo Iwata), Norihiro Yamagishi (Urawa Red Diamonds), Shusaku Nishikawa (Oita Trinita).

Defenders: Alessandro Santos (Urawa), Keisuke Tsuboi (Urawa), Akira Kaji (Gamba Osaka), Marcus Tulio Tanaka (Urawa), Yuichi

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Ronaldo - Adriano swap?

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have agreed in principle a swap deal with Inter Milan with Ronaldo going back to his former Italian club and fellow striker Adriano going in the other direction, according to Cadena Ser radio on Wednesday.

Also according to Radio Marca this could be facilitated by another swap deal involving the "merengues" - whose opening 0-0 draw with Villarreal earned them a resounding booing from their fans.

It would see them securing the services of Arsenal's Spanish international winger Jose Antonio Reyes, who stunned the

Premiership side by saying he is homesick and never wants to play in England again, in exchange for out of favour Brazilian attacking midfielder Julio Baptista.

It would also see Real pay three million euros on top of that for Reyes, who has in truth never really settled at the club.

According to Cadena Ser the deal for Ronaldo and Adriano - who failed to gel during the World Cup finals with the former arguably the more potent threat despite being criticised for being overweight - will be sealed on Thursday.

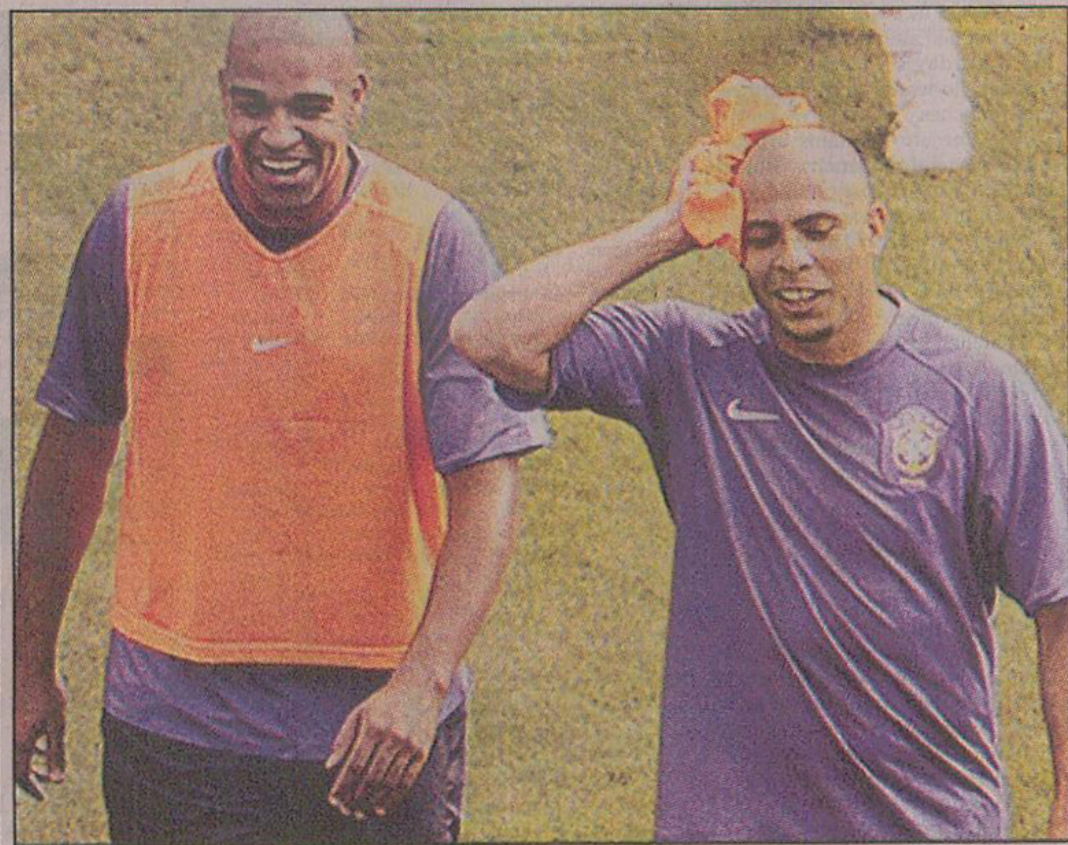
"Real Madrid and Inter have already agreed terms," the internet site of the radio station reported.

Madrid coach Fabio Capello is known to be a big fan of Brazilian striker Adriano.

The 2002 World Cup winner Ronaldo, whose contract runs till June 2008 and has a net annual salary of 7.5 million euros, is set to be back in action in several weeks after having undergone an operation on his left tibia following the World Cup finals last month.

Both Ronaldo and 24-year-old Baptista have said they did not want to leave Real despite both going through rough patches at the club.

Baptista scored just eight goals in 32 matches last term after his 24million euros transfer from a hugely successful stint at Sevilla where he'd scored 38 goals in two seasons while Ronaldo, 29, was known to be upset at being booted for a large part of last season as Real finished trophyless again.



A file photo shows Brazil superstar Ronaldo (R) and his teammate Adriano sharing a light moment at a training session during the World Cup in July 2006.

PHOTO: AFP FILE



Argentina forward Carlos Tevez (R) controls the ball as teammate Javier Mascherano watches during a training session at the World Cup in Germany in June 2006.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

Inter-Viola on day one

AFP, Rome



The Italian football league on Wednesday announced the fixture lists for the forthcoming Serie A and Serie B seasons.

Serie A, which will be missing Juventus following their relegation for match-fixing, begins with two games on Saturday, September 9: Fiorentina at home to champions Inter Milan and Roma entertaining Livorno.

The remaining eight Serie A matches will be played the following day.

Inter finished third last season

but were awarded the championship after Juve and AC Milan were found guilty of rigging matches.

Fiorentina, Lazio and Reggina were also found guilty of match-fixing, but along with AC Milan they retained their status in the top division due to their lesser involvement in the scandal.

However, the quartet were all deducted points with Milan starting on minus eight, Fiorentina on minus 19, Lazio on minus 11 and Reggina on minus 15.

Juventus, who were handed a 17-point penalty for the start of the season and face an uphill battle to bounce swiftly back into Serie A, begin life in the second division away to Rimini on the Adriatic coast.

All the Serie B fixtures will take place on Saturday, September 9.

There will be four midweek rounds in Serie A: September 20, October 25, December 20, and February 28.

There will be no Serie A fixtures on October 8 and March 25 due to internationals, and neither on December 31 and January 7 due to the Christmas break.

The Serie A season will end on May 27, 2007, while the Serie B season will end on June 10, 2007.

Although the dates for the new season have been set, it could still be delayed if Juventus carry out their threat to take their appeal against their punishment for match-fixing to a civil court.