



Lyon's Brazilian playmaker Juninho (R) is locked in a video game challenge with San Antonio Spurs' Tony Parker in Lyon on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Scots look France in the eye

AFP, Glasgow



Scotland boss Walter Smith believes France have improved since they lost to Italy in the World Cup final, but says his team can still triumph in their Euro 2008 qualifier at Hampden on Saturday. Currently the Scots top Group B on goal difference from the French, but the World Cup finalists are the overwhelming favourites to be in pole position by the end of the 90 minutes.

Already Raymond Domenech's side have secured a 3-1 revenge victory over world champions Italy at the Stade de France, after their opening 3-0 win against Georgia. And Smith says the manner of these two victories have shown France are not suffering any World Cup hangover and are in better shape now than they were in Germany.

"The popular perception is that after the World Cup teams are not

quite as good but I think France are proving that wrong," said Smith.

"They have set a foundation in winning their first two games in this tournament. They were tremendous results and the performances they gave in both games were outstanding.

"France have good players all over the pitch and there is a togetherness allied to a level of ability. They are a better side now than when they got to the World Cup Final."

The last time the two teams met in Paris in 2002 Scotland, managed by German coach Berti Vogts, were thrashed 5-0.

However, since Smith took over in December 2004 the Scots have improved dramatically and there is a growing belief they can cause a shock against France and in Ukraine the following Wednesday. "You always set out to win matches so I don't like to set a specific target," said Smith. "Our objective would be to do as well as we can and if it leads to us winning then fine. "But it would depend on how the

games go. Maybe at the end of the matches two points would be a decent return but it may be that we play well enough to get more."

Scotland will be without first choice striker Kenny Miller of Celtic, who is suspended for the game, and West Bromich Albion midfielder Nigel Quashie is out with an ankle injury.

Top goalscorer James McFadden has not played since picking up a hamstring injury against Lithuania but played in a reserve game for Everton on Tuesday and could feature as could his club teammate, defender David Weir, who has only made two substitute appearances for the Goodison side this season.

Though France are expected to win Saturday's match and to qualify from Group B alongside Italy, Domenech has warned his players against underestimating Scotland.

Indeed the French boss says they will provide a tougher test than the World Cup winners did last month.

Domenech said: "Please do not underestimate the importance of

this match with Scotland.

"We've dealt with the Italy match and now we're into the crucial stages of the Euro 2008 qualifiers."

"Personally, I feel the trip to Scotland will be the first genuine match of the qualifying campaign. Scotland aren't top of the group with us by accident.

"They got there with two exceptionally good results. They have done enough to merit our respect and they will get that."

France have injury doubts. Manchester United's Louis Saha is doubtful while Lyon's Sidney Govou has been ruled out with an ankle injury.

Arsenal defender William Gallas is also struggling.

Bolton Wanderers striker Nicolas Anelka could replace Govou while Lyon defender Sebastien Squillaci have been called up to provide cover.

Reebok, L'pool locked in court

INTERNET, undated

A grudge match between Liverpool and their former shirt sponsor Reebok kicked off in the High Court in London yesterday.

The dispute between the Reds and the sportswear manufacturer involves a 7-million-pounds claim and counterclaim over the Liverpool away jersey.

Reebok are claiming losses over a delay in the release of the kit for the start of the 2005/06 season which they say was caused by the club's shirt sponsorship talks with Carlsberg.

The manufacturer refused to abide by the terms of their contract with the club.

Liverpool insist the delay of two months did not cost Reebok revenue, it merely delayed the inevitable vast sale of shirts following the club's Champions League victory.

At yesterday's hearing before Mr Justice Langley, Liverpool agreed terms with Reebok for the disclosure of documents relating to the sales of the shirts.

The actual trial, expected to last up to five days, is scheduled for April next year.

We're no joke: Aragones

INTERNET, undated

Spain coach Luis Aragones has hit back at winger Joaquin's claims that the national team are a joke, and urged the media to turn a page on the unsavoury chapter.

"At no time has the national team been a joke," Aragones insisted. "Not when I arrived, nor now. He has made these statements, but it's not the case. The players can say it, but another way [to show it] is to achieve what we have set out to."

Commenting on the shock 3-2 defeat to Northern Ireland, the former Mallorca coach continued said:

"We played a match that we should normally have won, but I don't know where this talk of chaos comes from. From 29 matches we have only lost two. (Northern) Ireland did beat us, though I still think we shouldn't have lost."

Aragones also poured scorn on Joaquin's claims his manager has no confidence in him, pointing out "of the 29 matches that I have been in charge, Joaquin has been in the squad for 27 of them, and played in 20 of them. In any case, I believe that confidence isn't a given, it has to be won, like everything in life."

Spain have made a poor start to their qualification for Euro 2008, and press reports have suggested defeat against Sweden may spell the end for their veteran coach. But Aragones brushed off the criticism and speculation, insisting:

"Even if we lose, which I hope doesn't happen, we still have time to qualify. I want us to win, and I believe we will win, but a draw wouldn't be bad either."

Brazilians in Kuwait

REUTERS, Dubai

Brazil were given a rousing reception when they arrived in Kuwait in the early hours of Friday morning for Saturday's friendly.

Television pictures showed hundreds of people waiting to greet the team at the airport, which was decorated with murals depicting great Brazilian players and teams of the past.

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said on its official Web site that more fans were waiting for the team at the hotel.

"It was a reception worthy of the five-times world champions," said the CBF.

The CBF added that the Kuwaiti Army sealed off the hotel, allowing only guests within a 200-metre radius.

Coach Dunga and the Brazilian-based players travelled on a commercial flight from Sao Paulo to Frankfurt, where they joined the European-based players. The squad then travelled to Kuwait on a charter flight.

Brazil are unbeaten in three games under former captain Dunga, who replaced Carlos Alberto Parreira following their disappointing World Cup performance when they were knocked out in the quarterfinals.

They also play Ecuador in a friendly in Stockholm on Oct. 10.

Chelsea work on pitch

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea have used the international break to carry out work on the Stamford Bridge pitch.

The Premiership champions have taken advantage of the 18-day break between home fixtures to improve their drainage system.

The club rejected have any suggestion that it might damage the quality of the playing surface ahead of their next home game against Barcelona on October 18.

A Chelsea spokesman said: "There are few times in the season when we can ensure our pitch remains in perfect condition."

"The international break allows us to carry out this work towards our aim of maintaining our playing surface as one of the best in the league."

Chelsea came under fire last season for the state of their pitch ahead of the Champions League clash with Barcelona.

Barca accused the Blues of deliberately allowing the surface to fall into disrepair. The pitch was sandy and heavily watered ahead of Barca's visit to west London last season.

But the Spanish champions won the game 2-1, knocked Chelsea out and went on to win the trophy.

Chelsea, who have suffered from severe pitch problems for years at Stamford Bridge, insist the latest work on the drainage is part of their long-term investment plan.

They claim it will improve the system installed as part of a complete overhaul that took place in the summer of 2003.

New drainage ducts have been fitted, four metres apart, to ensure almost instant removal of water.

Revolt of England

AFP, Manchester



England manager Steve McClaren has slammed suggestions of a player revolt ahead of his country's European Championship qualifier with Macedonia at Old Trafford on Saturday.

According to a report in The Daily Mirror, influential members of McClaren's squad are unhappy about the introduction of a new 3-5-2 formation and want to use the more familiar 4-4-2 system which has earned them six points from the first two qualifying games.

Despite spending the past two days training in the Terry Venables-inspired 3-5-2, a meeting was reputedly arranged for Thursday night at the England hotel in which the players expressed their reservations.

But on Friday McClaren strongly denied such a meeting took place and said the report had tarnished the build-up to his fourth game in charge of his country.

"It really disappoints me to read the headline in a certain newspaper this morning," said McClaren.

"The players do not pick the team."

"It disappoints me to read that the players have had a meeting."

"The players did not have a meeting, they do not pick the team."

"I hate anything that hampers any preparation to a game."

McClaren, however, refused to rule out adopting a 3-5-2 system against a Macedonia team ranked 51st in the world.

"We have to look at different ways," the England coach added.

"We've had two sessions with 3-5-2 and it's a system we can go to."

"We've got the players to use that system and who are very comfortable at using that system."

"It's something we may use in the future. I said at the beginning that we will try different things."

"We won't be static in our formation. We've already proved we can play 4-4-2."

"We may see 3-5-2 this weekend, next Wednesday against Croatia or in the future."

The match is likely to mark the return of Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney from a three-match suspension following his dismissal in England's World Cup quarter-final defeat to Portugal in the summer.

Should, as expected, he win his 34th cap, Rooney, who turns 21 later this month, is expected to receive a warm reception from the Old Trafford crowd as he looks to end a worrying goal drought for his country.

Rooney has not scored a competitive goal for his country since netting twice in a 4-2 win over Croatia at Euro 2004.

He goes into the game with his form and temperament under the spotlight. However, McClaren says

he has no need to have a quiet word in Rooney's ear before the game.

"I talk to the team as a whole about their responsibilities," added McClaren. "I've no need to talk to him about discipline."

England are seeking their second win over Macedonia in five weeks after Peter Crouch's goal proved enough to seal victory in Skopje last month.

Despite victory, McClaren said he was not entirely happy with his side's attitude during the game.

"Yes, it was a great result in Skopje," he said. "The performance and certain aspects were very good, the defending was excellent."

"But we need to play better football."

"At times when we go 1-0 up we've got to push forward and not sit back."

"That's something I have discussed with the players because for the last 15 minutes in Macedonia we sat back."

"It was a great result, but we can do better."

England are without midfielder Owen Hargreaves while Everton striker Andy Johnson has also been forced to pull out due to a hamstring problem. Chelsea winger Shaun Wright-Phillips is on standby to make a rare start for his country.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian defender Lucio (C) speaks to the press while coach Dunga (R) talks to an official during a press conference in Kuwait City on Friday. Brazil will play Kuwait today.

Joaquin softens Spain slur

REUTERS, Madrid



Valencia winger Joaquin, dropped from the Spain squad for Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier against Sweden, has attempted to soften his inflammatory comments about the national side and coach Luis Aragones.

"Maybe I didn't express myself very well, I wanted to say that these are difficult times for the national side," the 25-year-old winger told a news conference on Friday, a day after saying the team was in chaos.

"I didn't want to go as far as what they have said in the papers. "I wanted to say that things are not so clear for the national side after the defeat against Northern Ireland but it wasn't my aim to

attack the national team nor Luis Aragones."

It was certainly a less forthright approach than he took in an interview with Punto Radio on Thursday night.

"Right now the national team is a joke, it's in chaos and not even Luis knows which way to turn," he said.

"I know what I'm saying won't help me get back into the squad but it's what I feel. All that is left to me is to work hard to try and regain the confidence of the coach."

The build-up to the Sweden game has been overshadowed by a national debate over Aragones's decision to drop captain Raul for the first time in 10 years for a reason other than injury.

Aragones's future as national coach has also been questioned following the team's shock 3-2 defeat to Northern Ireland in their

last qualifier.

The 68-year-old tendered his resignation shortly after last month's game in Belfast but reversed that decision almost immediately.

Joaquin, who has played 42 games for Spain, appeared to put out by the fact that attention was focused on the decision to drop Raul.

"The press are only talking about the fact that Raul has been left out but they haven't said anything about me," he said.

The winger, who has been replaced in the squad by club colleague Miguel Angel Angulo, said that Raul did not deserve to be dropped after scoring three goals in a week for Real Madrid.

Spain are in joint second place in Group F, three points behind leaders Sweden with three points from two games.

Forget Eriksson, look ahead



AFP, London

England defender Rio Ferdinand claims an over-cautious and rigid approach to this summer's World Cup cost them the chance of winning football's most coveted trophy.

England last won the World Cup in 1966, but in every tournament since then Ferdinand agrees they have mostly flattered to deceive.

The Manchester United defender believes the team led by former manager Sven-Goran Eriksson in Germany were tied down by positional dogma and lacked the flair and fluency needed to beat the best teams in the world.

New boss Steve McClaren has spent this week experimenting with a 3-5-2 system in a bid to solve the problem and coax the best out of his under-achieving squad.

Ferdinand, 27, said: "When you see all the best teams, you don't see them in a rigid forma-

tion. You see players drifting.

"In the past, England teams have been too rigid in my view."

"Players have been put in positions and then that's it, you just do that and that's what's expected of you."

"We have to expect and demand a lot more of each other."

"It can come from all over the park. Obviously you don't just do it willy-nilly but I think we were over-cautious in our play -- not just in the last World Cup but in most World Cups."

"We've been a lot more cautious than we should have been, whereas other teams throw caution to the wind a little bit and still get good results."

As part of their bid to break England's rigid lines the United centre-half has been encouraged to carry the ball out of defence and into midfield by McClaren and his assistant Terry Venables.

Ferdinand said: "I've always been brought up to be a free spirit playing football but it wasn't really encouraged under the last regime."

"It's about the team being a cohesive unit and that's what the

manager is trying to get into this squad and his teams, being able to be fluid as unit both attacking and defending."

"If we're going to be successful, then we're going to need to do that."

Ferdinand admits the England team have flattered to deceive in the big tournaments and must accept criticism for under-achievement.

"We haven't won a tournament and that's what you get judged on."

"We haven't got to the semi-final or the final. I don't think it's unfair. If it gets personal it's unfair but, in terms of looking at it in black and white, I wouldn't say it's unfair."

England play Macedonia at Old Trafford on Saturday.

The game is a sell-out, with a 71,000 crowd expected to set a new record for an England home game outside Wembley.

The previous best was 70,373 for the friendly against Jamaica, also at Old Trafford, in June.

Players union behind Barton

AFP, London

England's Football Association is facing a multi-pronged attack in the wake of their announcement of possible sanctions against Manchester City's Joey Barton.

Barton cheekily dropped his shorts and bared his buttocks to the Everton fans last week in a bid to silence their jeers after he had handed his shirt to a disabled fan following his goal in the 1-1 draw.

The FA have stepped in and now Barton is expected to be fined when an FA disciplinary commission hears the case on Tuesday.

However, after Merseyside Police decided against taking action against Barton, City hoped the FA would follow suit.

Club spokesman Paul Tyrrell said: "It is deeply disappointing that the Football Association have decided to charge Joey Barton with improper conduct."

"The player accepts that some elements of his behaviour following the game with Everton were ill advised and he apologises to anybody who may have felt offended."

"He has been reminded of his responsibilities as a custodian of this football club but we do not believe his actions warrant any further investigation."

"We believe the FA should have taken into account the context of the incident and noted he behaved without any malice, and in a light-hearted manner."

Now the Player's Union chief Gordon Taylor has lent his support, claiming the FA were wrong to target Barton, especially when failing to act on Tottenham's Didier Zokora -- whose spectacular dive which won a penalty for Spurs the same weekend has been unofficially voted this season's most blatant act of cheating.

"I have to wonder why the FA have chosen to pursue this one, and not the case of Zokora, given that diving is one of the things the game is supposed to be going after," Taylor said in The Daily Mail.

... I think they have been a bit high handed. They could have just sent him (Barton) a letter in private. This was clearly a bit of fun that had been preceded by him going over to a disabled fan and handing him his shirt.

"How many players do you see doing that?"

Saviola denies 'selfish' tag



INTERNET, undated

Barcelona forward Javier Saviola has denied accusations that he is selfish and a mercenary. Saviola returned to Nou Camp after a season on loan at Monaco and a season at UEFA Cup winners Sevilla and has opted to stay and fight for his place at Barca despite being told he has no future there.

The diminutive Argentine striker was bewildered by claims that he is a gold-digger, telling El Mundo Deportivo:

"It was said of me, to spare the details, that I am a mercenary. I am not that. I don't play to line the pockets of anybody."

"All I want to do is play well on the pitch and be happy, because you can't do anything about those who criticise you"

Saviola was farmed out on loan to Monaco and was part of an impressive 2004/5 Champions League run, followed by a season at Sevilla that culminated in UEFA Cup glory, but returned from his last spell away and was unable to find a buying club willing to match his wages and was unwilling to move to England.



JAVIER SAVIOLA