

Intriguing int'l ties

Football

REUTERS, London

Germany have been scoring for fun in Euro 2008 qualifying but coach Joachim Loew must deal with an injury crisis in negotiating a tricky test away at Cyprus on Wednesday.

The match in Nicosia is one of seven qualifiers across the continent in a truncated programme featuring action in just three of the seven groups. Elsewhere, a host of friendlies offer coaches the chance to experiment before their sides resume qualifying next year. Germany have won three from three, in the process scoring 18 goals, to sit two points behind Group D leaders Czech Republic with a game in hand.

Loew's squad has been decimated by injury though.

Already without goalkeeper Jens Lehmann, injured strikers Lukas Podolski and Gerald Asamoah, midfielders Tim Borowski, Sebastian Kehl and Sebastian Deisler as well as defenders Christoph Metzelder, Marcel Jansen and Alexander Madlung, Germany suffered another blow on Monday when midfield duo Bernd Schneider and Piotr Trochowski were ruled out.

"We have a lot of tired players and a lot of injured players," team manager Oliver Bierhoff warned. "It would be a huge error to underestimate Cyprus now."

"We'll have to be extremely wary."

Cyprus have three points from three matches but are far from pushovers at home as Ireland will testify to having been humiliated 5-2 in Nicosia last month.

Also in Group D, Ireland will be seeking their first win and a boost to

their goal difference when they host San Marino, who have conceded 20 goals in their two games.

The battle for supremacy in Group E hots up with Israel hosting Croatia and Macedonia at home to Russia.

Israel have not lost on home soil for seven years and are unbeaten in their last 13 matches in qualifying competitions.

They face a Croatia side whose confidence will be sky high after a 2-0 win over England in Zagreb last month.

Both sides have seven points from three matches and Israel coach Dror Kashtan said he was fully aware of the task facing his team.

"Croatia is the strongest team in the group... they are disciplined and organised and have excellent players who play in the best clubs across Europe. We can expect a very tough match," he said.

World Cup semi-finalists Portugal need three points at home to Kazakhstan in Coimbra to put their Group A campaign back on track after a stuttering start which has yielded four points from three games.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari admits his side are in a transitional phase

EURO 2008 FIXTURES

(all times in GMT)	
Group A	
Belgium v Poland (1930)	
Finland v Armenia (1700)	
Group D	
Cyprus v Germany (1900)	
Rep of Ireland v San Marino (1930)	
Group E	
FYR Macedonia v Russia (1600)	
Israel v Croatia (1700)	

and has dropped experienced defender Nuno Valente and midfielders Costinha and Maniche to give a chance for young goalkeeper Daniel Fernandes, defenders Tonel and Nelson and midfielder Raul Meireles to shine. With Group A leaders Serbia not in action, unbeaten Finland have the chance to grab top spot if they can overtake Armenia in Helsinki. Belgium take on Poland in the other Group A tie.

Some intriguing friendlies offer some of Europe's elite to gauge their progress. Steve McClaren will demand a positive response from his England side following the Croatia defeat as they face the Netherlands in Amsterdam.

World Cup finalists France host European champions Greece while world champions Italy face Turkey in Bergamo without several regulars.

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni has included uncapped duo Alberto Aquilani and Cristian Brocchi in his 20-man squad with injuries ruling out midfielders Gennaro Gattuso and Simone Perrotta, and strikers Alessandro Del Piero, Luca Toni and David Di Michele.

Brazil's policy of playing friendlies in Europe continues with a game against Switzerland in Basel. Werder Bremen midfielder Diego has been recalled after a two-year absence but out of sorts striker Ronaldo was left out.

Coach Dunga will be defending a four-match unbeaten record as coach since he replaced Carlos Alberto Parreira after this year's World Cup.

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said that Edmílson has a right ankle injury and will be replaced by Borussia Dortmund's Tinga.

Wrong number!

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Paul Freier almost missed his summons as a last-minute replacement in Germany's squad for Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier in Cyprus because of a wrong number.

"Coach Joachim" Loew called the number for Freier we had and left a message requesting a return call, a German Football Association (DFB) official said on Tuesday. Freier, however, had changed cell phone numbers since the last time he played for Germany 20 months ago.

Loew wanted to add Freier to his 18-man squad after two other midfielders were ruled out due to injuries.

On Sunday, Loew called the only cell phone number the DFB had for Freier. DFB officials grew nervous on Monday, just hours before the team's flight to Cyprus, when Freier had still not returned Loew's call.

They called Rudi Voeller, Bayer Leverkusen's director of football and got Freier's new number. He rushed to Frankfurt and managed to make the flight to Nicosia.

The 27-year-old Freier, who has 18 caps, last played for Germany in February 2005.

Edmílson woe for Brazil

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil coach Dunga, already without star strikers Ronaldo, Adriano, and defender Lucio, was dealt another blow on Monday when Edmílson was forced to pull out of Wednesday's friendly against Switzerland in Basel.

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said that Edmílson has a right ankle injury and will be replaced by Borussia Dortmund's Tinga.

Reina concedes title

AFP, London

Liverpool goalkeeper Jose Reina admits last year's European champions have no chance of ending their long wait to win the Premiership title this season.

Rafa Benítez's side are now 14 points behind leaders Manchester United after crashing to a dismal 3-0 defeat at Arsenal on Sunday.

And Reina is convinced the loss leaves his team, who last lifted the English crown in 1990, with too much ground to make up on United and title rivals Chelsea.

The Spanish star knows Liverpool must now concentrate on trying to win the Champions League as well as securing a lucrative place in the competition next season by finishing in Premiership's top four.

Reina said: "Fourth place is our target now, we have to fight for that. The Championship (title) is probably too far away for us because mathematically Manchester United and Chelsea are very superior."

"We have a lot of confidence in England and that is a target as well. We are probably a better team in the

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Real seal Marcelo deal

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have agreed a deal to sign Fluminense's Brazil fullback Marcelo, club president Ramon Calderon said on Tuesday.

"He is an important signing for us. He is a young player who will inject some freshness into the side and is part of our plan to bring younger players into the squad," Calderon was quoted as saying on daily Marca's Web site.

The 18-year-old international is reported to have signed until 2013 and could play the rest of this season in the club's youth team Real Madrid Castilla.

He will take a medical and could be presented on Wednesday.

Trezeguet sidelined

REUTERS, Milan

Juventus and France striker David Trezeguet will be sidelined for two to three weeks with a thigh muscle injury, his Serie B club said on Tuesday.

Trezeguet's injury means promotion-chasing Juventus, demoted to the second division after being implicated in a match-fixing scandal, will be without both their first-choice strikers as Italy international Alessandro Del Piero has also been ruled out for around 20 days.

Like Del Piero, Trezeguet picked up his injury in Juventus's 2-0 win over Pescara on Saturday.

The France international had not been included in the squad for his country's friendly against Greece on Wednesday.

Juventus lie third in Serie B, two points behind leaders Piacenza after 11 matches.

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PHOTO: AFP

England players jog at Arsenal's training ground on Monday on the eve of their friendly international against Netherlands on Wednesday.

England need a lift

Football

AFP, Amsterdam

After being shaken by mediocre performances against Macedonia and Croatia last month, England go into Wednesday's friendly against Holland in need of some stirring.

That was exactly the role head coach Steve McClaren had assigned to Aaron Lennon, before Tottenham's exciting young winger became the eighth player to withdraw from his squad.

In his absence, McClaren will be looking to the likes of Joe Cole, who missed the draw with Macedonia and defeat in Croatia, to inject a bit of zip into the performance of a squad that looked desperately short of ideas in last month's Euro 2008 qualifiers.

"You need players who can beat players and change the game," McClaren said.

"And the addition of players like Joe Cole provides that."

There should be a debut, at some

stage, for the highly-promising Micah Richards, which would make the Manchester City player, at 18 years and 144 days, the seventh youngest England player in history and the youngest defender.

Richards sees his long-term future as a central defender but he has been catching the eye at right-back for City this term and a calf injury to Gary Neville offers the perfect opportunity for McClaren to give him a first bite at the international cherry in the Amsterdam ArenA.

Lennon and Neville apart, McClaren has retained the services of his first choice players and has been cheered by the recent form of Wayne Rooney and Frank Lampard, both of whom looked flat during last month's setbacks.

"A lot was spoken about Wayne Rooney before but he's certainly exploded over the last few weeks," McClaren added. "And Frank Lampard has been fantastic -- I watched him in the Champions League for Chelsea in Barcelona

and he was outstanding. "I'm excited by the form of the players going into this game and we need to take that form into this match for England and give a performance that takes us forward."

McClaren can be expected to take a look at how Everton's Andy Johnson gels alongside Rooney, whose partnership with Peter Crouch has yet to convince.

But he will have to do without Charlton striker Darren Bent, Middlesbrough wide-man Stewart Downing, Newcastle captain Scott Parker and Lennon's Tottenham team-mates Ledley King and Jermaine Jenas, all of whom are ruled out by injury.

Wigan goalkeeper Chris Kirkland was excused the trip in order to attend the birth of his first child.

England have not won on Dutch soil since 1969 and it would take a remarkable improvement on England's recent displays for a win to be registered over Marco van Basten's squad.

But McClaren insists he has no

regrets about a trip that could shred morale as easily as restore it.

"I relish it," he insisted. "Absolutely. I would rather be playing this game than a lesser game. It's a great fixture with great tradition and always a very close one. It's going to be difficult, away from home in the Amsterdam Arena, of course it is. But as a player I would want to play in this match."

"I don't feel under pressure, not at all. I know what I'm doing, I know where I'm going, I know what I have to do without. I know what I'm going to achieve and I know how I'm going to achieve it. That's what matters."

Holland will be without Arsenal striker Robin van Persie, who joins Kirkland in missing the match because of the imminent birth of his first child.

Van Basten has recalled AC Milan midfielder Clarence Seedorf for the first time since becoming Dutch coach in 2004, because of an injury to Ajax's Wesley Sneijder.

Clubs fear stars' injuries

Football

AP, London

Alessandro Del Piero of Juventus and Borussia Moenchengladbach goalkeeper Kasey Keller already are on European club soccer's long injury list.

Now comes another chance to make it even longer.

Alongside seven European Championship qualifying games Wednesday are 17 more friendlies. No points at stake, just the prestige of winning the game and maybe the chance to try out some new players or tactics.

While those scenarios may be unlikely, club managers will be holding their breath in hopes their star players don't get hurt on duty with their national teams.

FC Barcelona's Lionel Messi,

with travel and the exertions of training and the match itself, there's the very strong chance of picking up an injury that should never have happened.

Europe's biggest clubs -- Barcelona, Real Madrid, Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool, Chelsea, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Bayern Munich -- each have up to 17 players away on international duty this week.

They have to break from club training, fly to another city for national squad practice, play a game and then return to their clubs in time for domestic matches on Saturday or Sunday.

While national team coaches demand their attendance and have the support of FIFA, it's a no-win

situation for the club managers. Manchester United's Alex Ferguson is already headed for an argument with Portugal's Luiz Felipe Scolari over the selection of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Portugal is playing a Euro 2008 qualifying game against Kazakhstan. Ronaldo has an ankle injury and Ferguson believes he should not be risked against a comparatively weak team.

"It's against Kazakhstan, so you would have thought Portugal could handle that without Ronaldo," Ferguson said. "But, if he's got one of these injuries which is 50-50, I hope he doesn't play."

Critics could say, that if they want to hire the biggest stars, the club managers have to accept it when the national teams come calling. But for friendlies?

Having already lost Messi for up to three months, imagine how Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard will feel if Ronaldinho limps home from Brazil's game against Switzerland.

Lyon's Gerard Houllier and Arsenal's Arsene Wenger have often complained about these friendlies. Because the clubs pay the players' salaries, they are furious when they return from international duty injured or burned out.

What the national coaches are doing is like taking the car from his garage without even asking his permission," Wenger said. "Then they'll use his car and abandon it in a field without any petrol in the tank."

"We'll then have to recover it, but it is broken down. Then, a month later, they'll come to take your car again and, for good measure, you're expected to be nice about it."

With an Aston Martin-like Thierry Henry in the garage, Wenger is entitled to be worried about his star striker's appearance for France against Greece. The Gunners are striving to catch up with Manchester United and Chelsea in the Premier League title race and are in a close fight for a spot in the next round of the Champions League.

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Danish legend Michael Laudrup (L) poses for a photo with Michael Platini after the Frenchman presented him with the Best Danish Player of All Time award at a gala ceremony in Copenhagen on Monday.