



England captain John Terry (L) attends a squad training session with manager Steve McClaren at Manchester United's Carrington training ground on Monday for their friendly against Spain.

Spain looking back

Football

AFP, Manchester

Luis Aragonés has told his bosses at the Spanish football federation that they can sack him if his side get beaten by England in Wednesday's friendly at Old Trafford.

It is a safe bet that there will be no such pre-match bluster from Steve McClaren: England's head coach is under enough pressure as it is.

With England trailing Croatia and Russia in their Euro 2008 qualifying group and next month's testing trip to Israel looming, McClaren could do with the boost to morale and his own reputation that would ensue from victory over a star-studded Spanish squad.

McClaren's job is not on the line yet. But there is no doubt that a degree of disquiet over whether he is up to the job of leading England to success in a major championships is rumbling away in the background.

The tactically inept performance that resulted in a 2-0 defeat in Croatia in October remains the main plank of the sceptics' case.

But the head coach's image has also not been helped by recent public criticism from two of his former Middlesbrough players,

Danny Mills and Massimo Maccarone, who both volunteered the term 'two-faced' to describe their former boss's management style.

His tetchy performances in front of the media would suggest otherwise, but McClaren professes to be unfazed by criticism of his performance since he took over from Sven-Goran Eriksson in the wake of England's disappointing early exit from last year's World Cup finals.

"My position is no different to any other manager," he said. "You win a game and you're great, you lose one and you can't manage anything. It is no different at international level."

Predictably, some of the current squad have rallied to the coach's defence, although midfielder Steven Gerrard, who is set to serve as a stand-in captain on Wednesday, admits everyone connected with England has something to prove.

"We know we have a big job on our hands. It's always the case with England because there is a lot of expectation," said Gerrard.

"What I would say is give the new coaching staff and player a chance. We have only played five or six games together under the new coach so for them to get the team

playing better and get us playing as a unit it will take a little longer.

"But I'm still confident we can top the qualifying group. There's still a belief in the dressing room that we can go and win all the remaining games."

McClaren's ability to adapt to circumstances will be tested on Wednesday with usual captain John Terry set to sit out the match as he has only just resumed playing for Chelsea after six weeks out following back surgery.

Jonathan Woodgate, back in the England fold for the first time in three injury-ravaged years, is favourite to start in his place.

McClaren must also find a new combination in attack as he is without Joe Cole, England's best player by some distance in their last match, a 1-1 friendly draw with Holland in Amsterdam in November.

Wayne Rooney has at least been able to join up with the squad after a speedy recovery from a back injury suffered in Manchester United's win over Tottenham at the weekend.

But Everton striker Andrew Johnson, who also started in Amsterdam, has only one match under his belt since coming back from an ankle injury, which could

ensure a fresh start for Peter Crouch.

England's last meeting with Spain, a 1-0 defeat at Real Madrid's Bernabeu stadium in November 2004, is remembered principally for the racist abuse large sections of the crowds hurled at the black players in the visiting team.

But Gerrard has not forgotten the lesson in passing and movement that Spain delivered that night.

The midfielder winces visibly at the memory of being "passed off the pitch" in Madrid and the prospect of facing his Spanish team-mates Xabi Alonso and Jose Reina at Liverpool's Melwood training ground on Thursday morning means it is not an experience he is keen to relive.

"What I learned from that night was that you can't give quality players time on a football pitch, because if you do they will hurt you," Gerrard said.

"So we need to get really close to them, give them the English style of football and rough them up a bit. And hopefully get a better result than we did at the Bernabeu because they beat us comfortably that night."

Messi set to defy Barca

INTERNET, undated

Lionel Messi is on collision course with his club Barcelona after saying he wants to play in the Under-20 World Cup. The 19-year-old is already a regular member of the full Argentinian national team, but is keen to represent his country at youth level.

The 24-team tournament takes place in Canada in June and July, and could require Messi to play seven matches.

Four days after the final, the Copa America begins in Venezuela for the senior team, and Messi's participation in both would almost certainly leave him jaded before the Spanish season gets under way.

Messi told Clarin newspaper: "Now the Copa America is coming and that motivates me."

"The same for playing the Under-20 World Cup, because I am the right age but I don't know if they are going to take me."

"If it were up to me, I would play every match in the national team's shirt."

"I have an indelible memory from the Under-20 championship in Holland (which Argentina won), because it was my best moment in football."

The skilful attacker would be a formidable weapon at Under-20 level, but his inclusion in two-summer tournament would enrage his paymasters at the Nou Camp.

Messi has been restricted by injury to 14 games for Barca this season but returns from injury soon, and has already established himself as a crucial part of the club's attacking armory.

Guti backs Beckham

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid outcast David Beckham should be playing for the club, not sitting in the stands on match days, midfielder Guti said on Tuesday.

Beckham has not played for Real since January 7 in the 2-0 defeat away to Deportivo La Coruna. Soon after, the former England captain announced his decision to join Los Angeles Galaxy at the end of the season.

Coach Fabio Capello said he would not pick Beckham again for the remaining six months of his contract. He has not been included in the last six squads for the league or King's Cup.

"First, I would say David is a friend of mine and that he is a great player. He has chosen a change in his career and he deserves the utmost respect from everyone," Guti told a news conference.

"We would all like to see him not only training with us but playing as well, but it is a club decision that is out of our hands. We want every player to participate, especially ones as important as David."

Both Capello and sporting director Predrag Mijatovic have said they want to blood some of the younger players in the side, as they seek to rejuvenate the team for the future.

Lee furious at Ronaldo 'dive'

AFP, London

Tottenham defender Young-Pyo Lee accused Cristiano Ronaldo of diving to win the penalty that set Manchester United on course for their 4-0 victory at White Hart Lane.

Lee was close to Ronaldo as he stumbled after a challenge by Steed Malbranque late in the first half on Sunday and the South Korean left-back is adamant there was no contact, with television replays supporting his claim.

Ronaldo has been regularly criticised for going to ground too easily when he is tackled and Lee was furious with the way he exaggerated his fall.

The Portuguese winger converted the 45th minute spot-kick himself and United went on to thrash Tottenham with further goals from Nemanja Vidic, Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs.

Lee said: "Me and Steed didn't touch him. I think he dived. I don't know why he fell, it's a great pity."

"All the Tottenham players were angry and I can't understand why some players do something like that."

"I am very disappointed with this defeat. This game was very important to us because we wanted to get back into the top 10."

"If we'd won this match we'd have gone up to seventh or eighth but it was very difficult. We have many matches left in the season and I hope we can still finish very well."

"It's important we bounce back against Sheffield United next week, it's a vital away match. We will try to do our best and if we do, we can achieve a good result."

"We will keep going and look forward. We have a very good squad and are still in two good competitions so there is still a lot for the fans to be positive about."

'Improve safety or no fans'

AFP, Rome



The Italian government said on Monday that football clubs whose stadium security does not meet the necessary

legal requirements will be forced to play their matches behind closed doors.

The move comes just three days after the death of policeman Filippo Raciti at the Sicilian derby between Catania and Palermo when fans went on the rampage before, during and after the highly-charged Serie A match.

The violence led to a suspension of all domestic and international matches.

Italy's interior minister Giuliano Amato insisted clubs would have to ensure their stadiums were safe or risk playing in front of empty seats.

"There is no debate to be had about this matter," Amato said after a meeting with Gianni Petrucci, the president of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) and Luca Pancalli, acting president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC).

The FIGC will decide when games can resume after a cabinet ministers' meeting about new security measures on Wednesday.

Pancalli said he was hopeful of a

resumption this weekend.

"After the government announces the emergency measures for football on Wednesday we will decide when to resume the championships," said Pancalli, who was drafted in to clean up the image of Italian football after last year's match-fixing scandal.

Only four Italian stadiums are believed to have security that falls into line with the 'Decreto Pisanu', laws passed by the previous government in an attempt to clamp down on hooliganism.

The measures include CCTV, named tickets, automatic turnstiles, adequate stewarding, the banning of racist banners and fireworks and flares.

But most clubs have failed to implement the regulations and the violence has continued up and down the country every week.

In Italy, many stadiums are owned by local councils and rented out to the clubs, and the clubs are reluctant to spend money on improving security as it eats into their profits.

AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini said playing matches without spectators would herald the death of the game in Italy.

"It would be an absurd solution," said Maldini.

"Playing behind closed doors will be the death of football, even if it's obvious that something has to

be done."

The government said that in addition to clubs having to abide by the 'Decreto Pisanu', other steps to improve security measures would be introduced immediately.

They include giving the police more power to arrest fans and limiting the sales of tickets to away fans.

Under current laws, which can differ from region to region, police need a warrant signed by a judge before they can formally arrest offenders, and unless they get one within a certain time frame they have to release them.

The government is also considering the banning of all away fans for high-risk matches.

Catania president Antonino Pulvirenti said his club were being held to ransom by the hooligans, or 'ultras' who have been using intimidatory tactics to get free match tickets and travel concessions.

"For three years now we have been held hostage by these people," he said. For us it has become a daily battle, but we can only do so much on our own.

Raciti, 38, died of liver failure after a home-made bomb was thrown into his car by a rioting fan.

Thousands turned out at his funeral on Monday at Catania's cathedral.

Capello safe for the season

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid confirmed on Monday they were keeping faith with under fire coach Fabio Capello despite Sunday's 1-0 home loss to struggling Levante which produced a near revolt among the fans of the former European champions.

Real "have decided to maintain their confidence in Fabio Capello," board spokesman Miguel Angel Arroyo told a news conference at the Bernabeu stadium, in comments suggesting the Italian was safe until the summer.

The situation "requires continuity and stability," Arroyo added.

Sporting director Pedja Mijatovic insisted that the current crisis enveloping the club -- seven league defeats have left them just fourth in the table and looking unable to end a run of three trophyless seasons -- would not last.

"We still have a chance of achieving something this season," said Mijatovic, notwithstanding Sunday's morale-sapping home loss to a side in the bottom three which had never won in the Bernabeu and left Real five points behind leaders Barcelona.

"I am optimistic things will change for the better," Mijatovic insisted.

"We're still in there in a good position. Capello is a great coach and he has a phenomenal CV. We have confidence in him."

Mijatovic insisted the decision to offload Ronaldo to AC Milan last month was part of the club's current strategy to give young players their head and that the transfer came after the player indicated he was not averse to a move.

He added that was also the thinking behind the decision to leave David Beckham kicking his heels as the former England captain prepares to join US outfit LA Galaxy in the summer.

"Beckham has been a great professional these past few years but he took decision to join another team, in this case a US team."

"The time has come to give the youngsters a chance to get more minutes under their belt and we are now counting on them," Mijatovic said, saying a new "cycle" was beginning.

The club continued its clear out in announcing England defender Jonathan Woodgate, on loan at Middlesbrough since August, has secured a permanent move to the English Premiership club.

"Real Madrid and Middlesbrough have reached an agreement for the permanent transfer of Jonathan

Woodgate," the Spanish giants announced.

On Sunday, after fans jeered the side off the pitch, Capello made no secret Beckham was unlikely to get a chance to return and that he was resolved to bring young players into the side.

"Beckham doesn't do anything for me. In the three years he has been here the results haven't been that good. Now we are trying a new way of doing things," said Capello, who preferred to have 20-year-old Miguel Nieto on the bench than call up Beckham.

Despite Mijatovic's attempts to talk up Real's chances of rescuing their campaign the media earlier noted that the fans had demanded the resignation of chairman Ramon Calderon after the Levante game.

"The Bernabeu explodes," was how El Pais newspaper saw the cascade of angry sentiment which poured from the stands, while AS sports daily said that "the Bernabeu is fed up."

El Pais described the team as a "public joke."

But long-serving defender Michel Salgado urged the team to "back Capello to the hilt" and said the players all had to share the blame.

Woodgate sold to Boro

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid said Monday that defender Jonathan Woodgate, on loan at Middlesbrough since August, has secured a permanent move to the English Premiership club.

"Real Madrid and Middlesbrough have reached an agreement for the permanent transfer of Jonathan Woodgate," the Spanish giants announced.

"Real Madrid wish Jonathan Woodgate great success both personally and professionally in this new stage of his career."

Woodgate, 27, suffered an injury nightmare during his two years at the Bernabeu, playing just nine games.

He joined Real on a four-year deal from Newcastle in August 2004 for 13.4 million pounds despite suffering a serious thigh injury when he was signed.

He did not play his first league match for Real until September 2005.

Middlesbrough signed Woodgate on loan last August for one season, and the defender has been named in the England squad that faces Spain in a friendly on Wednesday.

Cisse apologetic to Yepes

REUTERS, Paris

Olympique Marseille's Djibril Cisse apologised on Tuesday for injuring Paris St Germain defender Mario Yepes during a Ligue 1 match last weekend.

Colombian Yepes picked up a serious ankle injury in a collision with the French striker and has been ruled out for the rest of the season.

"It's the first time in my career I've hurt an opponent and I want to apologise again," Cisse was quoted as saying on the French football federation Website.

"I tried to call him (Yepes) this morning but I only got his answerphone. Some people believed that I wanted to hurt him but it never was my intention," he said.

Marseille and PSG drew 1-1 at the Stade Velodrome with Cisse scoring for his side midway through the second half.

Owen seeking rugby inspiration

AFP, London



Michael Owen is taking inspiration on his long journey back to full fitness after his

crippling World Cup knee injury from England rugby hero Jonny Wilkinson.

Wilkinson made a stunning return to action after a three-year injury lay-off with a record points haul in England's Calcutta Cup win over Scotland at the weekend.

And no one could appreciate what Wilkinson had to go through to make it to Twickenham better than Owen whose career has been similarly blighted by injury, the latest misfortune coming when he collapsed in agony seconds into England's World Cup match against Sweden in Cologne last June.

But as he prepares to step up his recovery in a bid to get back playing for Newcastle before the end of the season Owen is looking to Wilkinson's recovery as a model for his own.

"There are a lot of similarities in our careers," the England striker told The Times on Tuesday.

"Jonny has had plenty of problems with injuries -- his shoulder and his knee -- and I've obviously got my knee at the minute. Between us, I think we've had just about everything."

"But to see him coming back I think the whole of England is delighted when someone that they know can perform at that level comes back and actually does it."

"If you ask him now, he won't be saying how well he played. He'll be wanting to keep playing at that level. The best players in the world in any sport have that attitude."

Owen, who ruptured an anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee, is philosophical about this latest reverse in his career and is desperate to play some part in the tail end of his club's season.



Sevilla's new Argentinian defender Federico Fazio plays keepy-uppy during his presentation at the Sanchez Plazuan Stadium on Monday. Fazio, a former under-20 player, signed a five-year contract with the Andalusian club.



Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello watches his players stretching at a training session in Madrid on Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	40 Merriment	2 Fancy containers	24 Recipe meas.
1 Reagan nickname	42 1979 Pa. meltdown site	3 Carries	25 Milwaukee product
6 Gulf of Oman port	44 Run away	4 IRS employee	26 Blissful-looking
12 Phoenician princess	46 "The 40-Year-Old Virgin"	5 Enjoyed oneself greatly	28 Bony
13 Anxiety	50 Prove	6 Silent actor Paul	30 Feathery neckpiece
14 Classified info?	52 Take up the slack	7 Ones	31 Early bird?
15 In layers	54 Gets up	8 Witness	33 Country-club instructor
16 Otherwise	55 Peruvian wool-bearer	9 HOV-lane groups	34 Stretch (out)
17 Help	56 Hickory nuts	10 Cruising	39 Frequently
19 — de deux	57 Type of print, for short	11 Kennedy and Koppel	41 Burst forth
20 "¿Quién —!"		12 Lamb's mama	42 Catch red-handed
22 Torné predecessor		18 Surround and attack	43 Unembellished
24 Bill		21 Likely	45 Not so much
27 Quarter-back's tactic	DOWN	23 —	47 Beehive State
29 Option for Hamlet	1 Two-way		48 Erté's genre
32 Didn't toss and turn			49 Double-helix stuff
35 Bosc or Anjou			51 "Born in the —"
36 Welsh vegetable			53 Actress MacGraw
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12-16 CRYPTOQUIP

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: FATHER LIKED HIS FACT-CHECKING CAREER SO MUCH, HE NAMED HIS SECOND DAUGHTER ALMA NACK.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: M equals T