



French goalkeeper Gregory Coupet (L) chats with coach Raymond Domenech at a training session for the Argentina friendly at the Michel Hidalgo Stadium in Saint-Gratien on Monday.

France up against Argentina

Football

AFP, Paris

France will be looking for more than just a high-profile exhibition match during Wednesday night's international friendly against Argentina, striker Djibril Cisse said.

The Marseillle striker will be looking to line out at the Stade de France after returning to Raymond Domenech's squad for the first time since suffering an horrific leg injury on the eve of the World Cup.

And he insisted that all eyes would be firmly focused on next month's Euro 2008 qualifier against Lithuania rather than the South Americans.

The World Cup finalists are second in Group B for the European championships in two years time, with nine points from four games, after suffering just one loss to leaders Scotland.

After the Lithuania game in March, there will also be a key tie against Italy in September, and a visit to the Ukraine in November.

"Argentina is a choice game,

anyone would love to play this match but the coach is looking towards the Lithuania game," said Cisse.

"Against Argentina we can have an exhibition match or get down to business -- I'm not into beach football myself, it's not my style."

The 2000 European champions have however an injury crisis in

WEDNESDAY FRIENDLIES

(ALL TIMES IN GMT)
Albania v FYR Macedonia (15.00)
Algeria v Libya (17.00)
Andorra v Armenia (19.30)
Belgium v Czech Republic (19.45)
China v Kazakhstan (11.00)
Croatia v Norway (19.15)
Egypt v Sweden (18.00)
England v Spain (20.00)
France v Argentina (20.00)
Georgia v Turkey (17.00)
Germany v Switzerland (19.00)
Netherlands v Russia (19.30)
Iran v Belarus (13.30)
Israel v Ukraine (16.30)
Malta v Austria (17.00)
Moldova v Romania (15.00)
Morocco v Tunisia (19.00)
Slovakia v Poland (19.30)
Slovenia v Estonia (19.15)
Venezuela v Chile (23.00)

"It's great that the coach has

called on us even if we're only being playing two months together," said Ribery. "With 'Djib' we're often together in training and afterwards. We're getting on better and better."

Domenech has called up Marseillle's Julien Rodriguez and Arsenal's Mathieu Flamini as a security measure.

Argentine coach Alfonso Basile will be without midfielder Pablo Aimar and striker Aldo Duscher, with young Real Madrid midfielder Fernando Gago uncertain for his first call-up with a muscular problem.

But veteran captain Robert Ayala and Javier Zanetti believe that Arsenal captain Thierry Henry will be the man to watch.

"We respect France as a whole. It has players who could cause us problems like Henry, and not forgetting Ribery," said Zanetti.

But Ayala added: "We fear Henry the most."

"We know that he's the man to watch, but France counts on team play. They have an experienced defence, a midfield that gives few opportunities, and very fast players up front."

Pizarro lured by Juve

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich's Claudio Pizarro has admitted that he would be tempted by a summer move to Juventus.

The Peruvian has been associated with a switch to Turin in recent times and he's ready to consider a transfer if an offer was made.

"I know that Juventus are interested in me and I would like to play my football in Italy," the striker has stated.

"However, I've had no official contact with them."

"My agent has received a host of different offers and we will pick the best one which will suit my career plans."

The Old Lady of Italian football are keen on the attacker given that he is presently available on a free transfer.

However, Pizarro -- who former Juve player Andreas Moller has recommended -- has failed to rule out signing a new deal with Bayern once his present one expires in June.

"If Bayern offer me a new deal then it must be in line with what I'm expecting," he added. "Otherwise I will be free to look for a new club."

Pizarro could be netted as an alternative for David Trezeguet who may quit the Bianconeri at the end of the season.

Ballack shrugs off criticism

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack hit back on Monday at criticism of his form at English Premier League champions Chelsea, saying manager Jose Mourinho was happy with his performances.

"As far as I am concerned, I have integrated well into the team," Ballack said in an interview with the SIS sports news agency.

"I feel very happy, I've found my role in the team and I have had plenty of confirmation of that, above all from my coach, Jose Mourinho, with whom I talk a lot," the midfielder said.

Ballack, whose reported weekly salary of 130,000 pounds (255,000 dollars) is thought to make him the world's highest-paid player, dismissed the criticism of his lacklustre form in the English press.

"There are a load of tabloid newspapers in England, which always need something to write and it doesn't particularly bother me."

He did however accept that it was taking him time to adapt to his role in the star-studded Chelsea line-up.

Ballack dismissed the suggestion that he and Lampard were struggling to form an effective partnership.

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England midfielder Frank Lampard, was "stronger and takes his position".

Ballack is expected to line up for Germany in a friendly against Switzerland in Dusseldorf on Wednesday.

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The latest criticism of Ballack came not from England, but closer to home, from Bayern Munich president Frank Beckenbauer, who said he should have opted for Manchester United instead of Chelsea when he left Bayern last year because his teammate,

"We have a good understanding. "Chelsea have been champions for the last two seasons and so expectations are high.

"We are lagging behind a little in the title race and so this (the criticism) is something we have to live with, especially the new signings."

Ballack said Chelsea knew they could not afford any more "slip-ups" if they are to make up the six-point gap on United at the top of the Premiership.

"It'll be tough because United are so consistent. But we are still have a home match against them to come."

Ballack also said he believed that Mourinho would be staying at the club, despite speculation that he has fallen out with billionaire owner Roman Abramovich and could be eyeing a move to Real Madrid.

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