

UEFA fine Lille, MU

AFP, Paris

European football's governing body (UEFA) have fined French side Lille and English club Manchester United following the incidents that marred their Champions League last 16 encounter in February.

Lille were fined 61,734 euros for security violations and incorrect behaviour by the Lille players, who left the pitch after Ryan Giggs's quickly-taken free kick took everyone by surprise and consequently won the game.

United were meanwhile fined 9,256 euros for incorrect behaviour by the travelling fans including disturbances at the turnstiles.

Tear gas was used by police during the match at Len's Stade Felix-Bollaert after ticketing problems led to 5,000 supporters cramming into a stand built for 3,500.

Supporters appeared to be in danger of being crushed against a 10-foot high safety barrier and two fans were lifted over the barrier while security officials slammed shut a gate which had been pushed open by United supporters trying to relieve the pressure.

Television images of the game were used by UEFA during the investigation along with reports from both clubs and UEFA's disciplinary committee.

The two clubs have three days to lodge an appeal against the decision.

Klasnic's op successful

AFP, Zagreb

Croatia's international striker Ivan Klasnic has undergone a successful kidney transplant after the first attempt failed in January and his doctors said he could start training in a couple of months.

The Jutamji List daily said the surgery was performed on March 16 at a Hanover clinic, with the donor being Klasnic's father. The first transplant was carried out in January but Klasnic's body rejected his mother's kidney.

"This time I didn't want to go public with the news of the surgery until the doctors were sure that my body had accepted a new organ," Klasnic told the daily.

Croatia coach Slaven Bilic, whose side top Euro 2008 qualifying Group E, congratulated him on behalf of the national team.

"We have heard of the great news and we all wish him a speedy recovery and return to the pitch, as he really deserves it," Bilic said.

Klasnic, 27, has played for Werder Bremen since 2001 and scored 42 goals. He has been on target eight times in his 26 caps for Croatia.

Spurs leading Nani race

INTERNET, undated

Tottenham are reportedly leading the race to sign Sporting Lisbon's Nani despite competition from Manchester United.

Both clubs have been tracking the 10 million pound-rated 20-year-old attacking midfielder for more than a season but now Spurs are ready to stump up the cash after director of football Damien Comolli watched him play against Porto at the weekend.

However the Portuguese club are reluctant to sell the hot prospect, known as the next Cristiano Ronaldo, and are trying to renegotiate his contract which ends in 2008.

It is believed Nani is seeking a move abroad and it was thought he would follow Ronaldo's footsteps to Old Trafford.

A Spurs source revealed to The Sun: "He's one we've been watching for a long time.

"If a reasonable deal could be done, we'd take him for next season."

Eng-Germany in Wembley opener

AFP, Berlin

German team manager Oliver Bierhoff confirmed on Thursday that Germany will play England in the first full international at the new Wembley Stadium on August 22.

The meeting between the two classic international rivals mirrors the last international played at Wembley when Germany beat England 1-0 on October 7 2000 and 90,000 fans are expected for the grand unveiling in August.

"We are glad to be involved in the first international at the new Wembley," said Bierhoff, with England set to play their first Under-21 international at the new stadium against Italy this weekend.

No room for errors

REUTERS, London



The European Championship finals are more than a year away, but the outcome of several key

qualifiers over the next week could have a significant bearing on who gets there.

With 14 months to go before the championship opens in Basel in June 2008 only co-hosts Austria and Switzerland are assured of their places in the 16-team event.

Forty qualifiers are being played on Saturday and next Wednesday and, although a handful of qualifiers were played during the winter months, this is the first time all the major nations have been in competitive action since November.

There is no more room for errors for those harbouring dreams of booking chalet hotels in the Alps next year.

Reigning European champions Greece, Sweden, the Netherlands and Scotland could all take significant steps along the qualifying path.

Conversely, defeats for established powers like world champions Italy, England or Portugal could seriously hamper their chances while defeat for Spain could kill off their hopes completely.

Greece, largely unimpressive for two years after surprisingly winning the title in Portugal in 2004, missed out on the World Cup last year.

But they have won their opening three matches in Group C and are just behind Turkey on goal difference. They now play the Turks, who have also made a perfect start with three straight wins, in Athens on Saturday and then travel to Malta

next week.

Whoever wins on Saturday will boost their chances considerably and Greek defender Yourkas Seitaridis says a victory would essentially mean qualification.

"If we win this match then we can say with almost certainty that we are through," he claimed while his team mate Takis Fyssas added: "This is a crucial game and we are aware that if we beat Turkey then we have taken a major step towards qualification."

With the top two in each of the seven qualifying groups advancing and no playoff deciders to come, a consistently strong campaign is essential.

No team has started better than Sweden in Group F where the Scandinavians have opened with four straight wins. A fifth successive victory over Northern Ireland next week will put them in a commanding and probably unassailable position in their group, leaving Spain, among others trailing in their wake.

Spain have won one and lost two of their opening three matches in Group F -- and if they were to lose again to unbeaten Denmark in Madrid on Saturday -- or even Iceland in Mallorca next week -- their campaign would effectively be over.

The Netherlands are another side who have started well with three wins and a draw and victories over Romania at home and Slovenia away next week will put them even closer to qualifying from Group G.

Scotland have made almost as good a start in Group B with three wins -- including a 1-0 victory over France -- and just one defeat from their first four games.

They face Georgia and world champions Italy in their first competitive matches under new coach Alex McLeish and would also take a huge step to the finals for the first time since 1996 with a win over the Georgians and even a draw against the Italians in Bari.

Scotland have lost all five matches they have played in Italy since 1931.

Scotland's old rivals England are not so well placed in Group E following a 0-0 draw with Macedonia and a 2-0 defeat in Croatia in their last two qualifiers.

They trail Croatia and Russia in the standings and a defeat to Israel in Tel Aviv on Saturday, in tandem with wins for Croatia over Macedonia and Russia over Estonia on the same day would cut England adrift of the top two.

Even if they then thrashed Andorra as expected next week in Barcelona, defeat to Israel could cost England coach Steve McClaren his job.

There are two choice matches in Group D with the top two, Germany and the Czech Republic meeting in Prague and Ireland facing Wales in an historic match at Croke Park -- the first ever soccer match played at the home of gaelic sport.

A win for Ireland, whose rugby union team played at the ground for the first time last month, would not only be hugely symbolic, but also keep alive their chances of catching the top two in the group.

Jose slams fixture list

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho says he is frustrated by the decision to reschedule the Blues' potential title decider against Manchester United.

The defending champions Chelsea are currently six points behind United at the top of the Premiership, and were due to meet them at Stamford Bridge on 15th April.

But because both teams are through to the FA Cup semi-finals, their League meeting has now been postponed until 9th May.

That means, given United's current lead, that the Red Devils could have secured their ninth Premiership title - and first for four years - by the time the teams meet.

Mourinho said: "What can I do? I cannot lose a game to play Manchester United earlier in the season.

"Everything in this League went against us from the beginning - injuries, decisions and fixtures.

"We played a Carling Cup final and had to play one game in hand afterwards and now we have the United game, which we want to play now, later on.

"We also have to play West Ham away and Newcastle away in the same week because of the congestion in the fixtures."

Platini for zero tolerance

AFP, Geneva

UEFA's new president Michel Platini has told police and government officials that he supports a policy of "zero tolerance" towards violence in and around football stadiums in Europe.

Platini made the comments in a meeting behind closed doors at UEFA headquarters on Wednesday, which was the first of a series European football's governing body is planning to tackle football violence.

"We have seen a worrying upturn in the number of acts of violence at football matches across Europe recently, both inside and outside stadiums, some resulting in tragic loss of life," he said in remarks released by UEFA.

"I support a policy of zero tolerance, and we at UEFA will do our part to stop incidents on the pitch," Platini added.

"But I encourage the group of specialists and experts gathered here to go as far as you can in translating your own knowledge, and in sharing the best methods among yourselves, in order to further extend this base to a European level."

The gathering followed an appeal by Platini for more government involvement and cooperation to stamp out football violence when he met European Union president Jose Manuel Barroso earlier this month.

It brought together ministry and police specialists from Austria, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Schuster for Real?

AFP, Madrid

German coach of Spanish club Getafe, Bernd Schuster, will replace troubled Real Madrid boss Fabio Capello this summer, according to Spanish sports daily AS on Thursday.

The former Real Madrid midfielder joins a host of top-flight coaches rumored to replace the under-fire Italian coach Capello including Chelsea's Jose Mourinho and Liverpool's Rafael Benitez.

However Mourinho and Benitez have recently rubbished the reports of an exit from their respective clubs.

According to AS, Real president Ramon Calderon have chosen 47-year-old Schuster to step in as early as July 1.

Capello has waded through troubled waters on and off the pitch recently, but a string of poor results and unimpressive performances have left the Spanish giants third in the domestic league, five points off leaders Barcelona and second-placed Sevilla.

Capello, who is under contract until 2009, will reportedly receive one-year's salary in compensation for his exit, reports AS.

Schuster played in Spain during the 80s and early 90s for Barcelona, Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid.

Germans look for Czech weakness

AFP, Berlin



German midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger said on Thursday his side aim to ruthlessly exploit

any weakness in the Czech Republic's defence to stay top of their Euro 2008 qualifying group.

The Germans only top Group D by virtue of goal difference from their Czech rivals so Bayern Munich star Schweinsteiger wants to make sure of three qualifying points in Prague on Saturday to give his side some breathing space.

"We have had a good look at the way they play and we know where their weaknesses are, we have to be ruthless against them," said the 22-year-old.

German coach Joachim Loew has told his side to attack the Czechs at every opportunity, but took time this week to organise his defence to cope with the towering threat of the hosts' striker Jan Koller.

At 6ft 8ins (2.03m), Koller is a defenders' nightmare in the air, even topping England's 6ft 7ins bean-pole Peter Crouch, but with 75 caps

and 48 goals to his name, his German minders Per Mertesacker and Christoph Metzelder will have their work cut out.

Metzelder played with Koller at Borussia Dortmund before the Czech switched to French side Monaco and will work in tandem with Mertesacker to keep Koller quiet.

"With his height and power, Koller is a dangerous man, especially with his long legs and we'll have to control his airspace, particularly at corners," said Metzelder.

While keeper Jens Lehmann will be trying to keep Koller quiet, at the other end, Germany's strikers Lukas Podolski and Kevin Kuranyi will be doing their best to unsettle Czech keeper Petr Cech.

The 24-year-old Chelsea goalkeeper suffered a fractured skull in a Premiership match last October, but he is back to his best and sporting a protective rugby headguard.

"I have got over the most difficult moment of my life, now I enjoy playing even more," says Cech on the eve of his first international since the injury which so nearly killed him.

"I am not afraid, I have got used to the helmet. It doesn't bother me,

there isn't anything for me to worry about."

His coach at Chelsea, Jose Mourinho, insists the Czech goalkeeper is stronger than before the injury.

Cech will be tested by the German pair eager to impress coach Loew, who is defending his unbeaten record having won six games and drawn one since replacing Jurgen Klinsmann after last year's World Cup.

With the 2006 World Cup's top goal-scorer Miroslav Klose ruled out after struggling with a back injury, his able deputies are relishing the challenge.

"It's a blow to be without Miroslav Klose," said Bayern Munich's Podolski, "but we must be able to substitute for him and forge a partnership."

And after Germany lost the last encounter between the sides when they were beaten 2-1 at the Euro 2004 championships, the visitors have a point to prove.

Kahn banned for Milan tie

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich goalkeeper Oliver Kahn will miss the Champions League quarter-final first leg clash with AC Milan in Italy next

month after being handed a one-match ban and a fine by UEFA on Thursday.

The 37-year-old German international veteran was fined 20,000 Swiss francs (12,339 euros) and banned for the first-leg tie at the San Siro stadium on April 3 after a UEFA Disciplinary Committee found him guilty of improper conduct.

Bayern's Brazilian defender Lucio was also hit with a fine of 6,171 euros for improper conduct at the same match.

Kahn was brought to task for

arguing with a doping control official following Bayern's 2-1 win over Real Madrid a fortnight ago, after which he was held back to give a urine sample.

In an interview posted on the Bayern website before the verdict, Kahn apologised to the doctor involved and explained the reasons behind the bust-up.

"It was a stupid situation," he said.

"I'm still extremely sorry for that, but it was the fourth time in a row we'd had a doping control after a match -- and would you believe it, I was picked out of 18 possible candidates for the fourth time.

"I was disgruntled, especially because my family was waiting and I'd promised to hurry up after the final whistle this time. We wanted to go out together for something to eat.

"The team was celebrating a win over Real Madrid, they were all

thrilled and ecstatic.

"And there I was in the medical room, watching the clock, knowing my family was waiting, drinking everything I could lay my hands on -- and then finally, after two hours, at close to one in the morning, I managed it. I took my container to the doctor, but he said he hadn't been watching me. I had to do it all again.

"I was knackered, angry and upset. The way I let my frustration get the better of me wasn't right."

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld was quoted on the website of Sport Bild magazine as saying Bayern will appeal UEFA's decisions.

"We are going to appeal with the hope of winning ... and finding a happy solution with UEFA," said Hitzfeld.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Argentine internationals and Boca Juniors teammates Juan Roman Riquelme (R) Martin Palermo celebrate a goal against Mexico's Toluca during their Libertadores Cup match in Buenos Aires on Thursday.

Riquelme scores in Boca win



REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Midfielder Juan Roman Riquelme scored his first goal since re-joining Boca Juniors on Thursday, helping his side to a 3-0 win over Toluca in the Libertadores Cup.

Ze Roberto's stoppage-time winner gave Santos a 2-1 win at Gimnasia-La Plata and sent the Brazilians into the last 16.

Paraguayans champions Libertad beat El Nacional 1-0 to stay unbeaten in Group One while Emelec beat Nacional 1-0 with a late goal to seriously dent the Uruguayan team's chances in Group Four.

Boca's win in Buenos Aires took the five-times champions top of Group Seven as they avenged last week's 2-0 defeat by their Mexican opponents.

Boca have seven points from four games, one ahead of Toluca and three clear of Bolivar.

Riquelme set up the first goal in the 16th minute when his free kick was headed in at the near post by defender Jonatan Maidana.

Riquelme, who returned for a second stint at Boca on loan from Villarreal after falling out of favour at the Spanish club, tapped in the second eight minutes later after Martin Palermo pulled the ball back.

Toluca's Jose Manuel Cruzalta was sent off for a second bookable offence four minutes before halftime.

Riquelme was also involved in the third goal in the 83rd minute, playing a one-two with substitute Mauro Boselli who cleverly lobbed the ball over Hernan Cristante from the edge of the area.

Santos made it four wins out of four in Group Eight after their win in La Plata.

Carlos Aurelio volleyed home in the third minute after the Gimnasia defence failed to cut out Rodrigo Tui's low cross.

Santos appeared to throw the game away as Cleber Santana missed a 34th minute penalty and Tui headed wide with the goal at his mercy in the 88th minute.

Bayern Munich player rifled the ball into the roof of the net.

The win guaranteed Vanderlei Luxemburgo's team a top-two finish with two matches to spare. Defensor Sporting have six points and Gimnasia three.

Carlos Bonet's 10th-minute strike gave Libertad a 1-0 win over Ecuadorean army club El Nacional 1-0 in Asuncion. Libertad top Group One with 10 points from four games, four ahead of America and Banfield.

El Nacional have one point. Emelec, Ecuador's other representatives collected their first points in Group Four after Carlos Quinonez scored in the 89th at Guayaquil's Capwell stadium.

Diego Jaume of Nacional and Marco Quinonez of Emelec were dismissed after an ugly clash in the 67th minute. Emelec also had Giovanni Caicedo dismissed in the last minute for a dangerous challenge.

Argentina's Velez Sarsfield lead with seven points followed by Nacional on four. Defending champions Internacional of Brazil and Emelec have three apiece.

EURO2008 Austria - Switzerland	
June 7 - 29, 2008	
Basel	Zurich
Salzburg	VIENNA
BERN	SWITZ
Geneva	Innsbruck
Klagenfurt	AUSTRIA

GROUP C	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Turkey	3 8 0 9
2. Greece	3 6 0 9
3. Norway	3 6 2 6
4. Bosnia-Herc	4 8 11 4
5. Hungary	4 5 8 3
6. Malta	3 4 8 3
7. Moldova	4 2 10 1

Moldova - Malta	1800
Norway - Bosnia-Herc	2000
Greece - Turkey	2030

GROUP F	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Sweden	4 8 2 12
2. Denmark	3 6 0 7
3. N. Ireland	4 4 5 7
4. Latvia	3 4 2 3
5. Spain	3 6 5 3
6. Iceland	4 4 8 3
7. Liechtenstein	3 1 11 0

Liechtenstein - N. Ireland	2015
Spain - Denmark	2200

Euro 2008 Qualifiers

GROUP A	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Finland	5 7 2 11
2. Serbia	4 6 1 10
3. Poland	5 6 5 10
4. Portugal	4 8 3 7
5. Belgium	5 4 2 7
6. Kazakhstan	5 1 7 2
7. Armenia	4 0 5 1
8. Azerbaijan	4 1 8 1

Poland - Azerbaijan	1800
Portugal - Belgium	2200
Kazakhstan - Serbia	1400

GROUP D	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Germany	4 19 2 10
2. Czech Rep.	4 13 2 10
3. Ireland	5 10 8 7
4. Slovakia	4 12 9 6
5. Cyprus	4 8 12 4
6. Wales	3 5 8 3
7. San Marino	4 1 27 0

Ireland - Wales	1600
Cyprus - Slovakia	1900
Czech Rep. - Germany	2045

GROUP G	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Netherlands	4 7 2 10
2. Bulgaria	4 7 3 8
3. Romania	3 7 3 7
4. Belarus	4 7 10 4
5. Slovenia	3 4 7 3
6. Albania	3 3 6 1
7. Luxembourg	3 0 4 0

Luxembourg - Belarus	1700
Albania - Slovenia	1700
Netherlands - Romania	2030

Continental time (GMT + 1)	
GROUP B	
	P / F / A / Points
1. France	4 11 2 9
2. Scotland	4 9 3 9
3. Italy	4 7 5 7
4. Ukraine	3 5 4 6
5. Lithuania	3 3 3 4
6. Georgia	4 9 9 3
7. Faroes	4 0 18 0

Scotland - Georgia	1600
Lithuania - France	1800
Faroes - Ukraine	1600

GROUP E	
	P / F / A / Points
1. Croatia	4 13 3 10
2. Russia	4 5 1 8
3. England	4 6 2 7
4. Israel	4 9 6 7
5. Macedonia	5 4 3 7
6. Estonia	3 0 4 0
7. Andorra	4 1 19 0

Croatia - Macedonia	2015
Estonia - Russia	1930
Israel - England	1930

Prev qualifiers

September 2, 2006
November 21, 2007

The top two teams in each group qualify for the final phase

220307 AFP

Gerrard backing Rooney

AFP, Tel Aviv



England may be woefully short of strikers at the moment, but Steven Gerrard believes supporters

have nothing to worry about -- as long as Wayne Rooney stays fit.

The Manchester United forward goes into England's Euro 2008 crunch with Israel here on Saturday on the back of a strong run of form for his club.

But Rooney will also be aware that it is some time since he produced his best in an England shirt and he will be keen to put that right when he partners Andrew Johnson in attack against Israel and, if all goes to plan on Saturday night, against Andorra in Barcelona next Wednesday.

Gerrard, for one, is confident that Rooney will deliver, and he was particularly encouraged by the sight of the United forward terrorising Israeli centreback Tal Ben Haim in United's 4-1 win over Bolton at the weekend.

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