



England striker Wayne Rooney (R) and Israel defender Tal ben Haim (C) clash heads over a disagreement during their Euro 2008 qualifier at the Ramat Gan Stadium in Tel Aviv on Saturday.

McClaren under the cosh

REUTERS, London



Media critics sharpened the knives for England manager Steve McClaren on Sunday after a 0-0 draw with Israel in a Euro 2008 qualifier.

"One Holy Mess" declared the tabloid Mail on Sunday in a back page headline over a picture of a pensive McClaren walking off the field with his head bowed after Saturday's Group E game in Tel Aviv.

"Clueless" blasted the Observer. Newspapers highlighted fans booing and chanting "what a load of rubbish" and "you don't know what

you're doing" after England slumped to their worst scoring run in 26 years with just one goal from five games.

"Mac's Hell Aviv" said the Sunday Express, seeing Wednesday's match with Andorra in Barcelona as crucial to the manager's future.

"England lacked conviction -- and at times energy -- and a point against a side with some players who are not even household names in their own parish is nothing to celebrate," it said.

"Anything less than a rousing win (against Andorra) and McClaren can expect the noose to be tightened around his neck," added the newspaper.

"Isra-Hell" was the News of the World back page headline that said

McClaren "faces the wrath of the nation" after a game that dented England's chances of reaching the finals in Austria and Switzerland next year.

England are third in Group E with eight points. Croatia have 13 and Russia 11.

"Here was a timely reminder that England's performance in the last World Cup was actually abysmal," wrote Paul Wilson in the Observer.

"This was simply more of the same, always the danger in giving Sven-Goran Eriksson's assistant his job."

The Independent wondered whether England had in fact reached the point of no return. "Goalless and soulless: England on the brink," it declared.

The Sunday Times labelled the

match "Euro Trash" while the Telegraph saw "England's Flops".

"After this awful performance... it promises to be a perilous journey for England manager Steve McClaren, who may not even reach the end of his personal road," added the Telegraph.

The papers were also critical of McClaren's post-match confusion, with the manager suggesting the game had been lost before correcting himself, and reported angry scenes in the dressing room.

"He ranted and raved at the players, who just sat there with their heads down. I had my say too," the Mail quoted captain John Terry as saying.

France given racist greeting

AFP, Kaunas, Lithuania

France's savouring of a precious 1-0 win over Euro 2008 qualifying rivals Lithuania was tampered with by the brandishing of a racist banner by the home fans here Saturday.

Nicolas Anelka's late strike saved France's blushes with barely 20 minutes remaining, allowing France -- and their coach Raymond Domenech -- some breathing space.

However much of the after-match talk in the dressing room centred on a banner with racist overtones and which appeared to be aimed at France's black players.

According to AFP reporters the banner bore a painting of Africa in the blue, white and red colours of France's national flag, emblazoned with the words: "Welcome to Europe".

French football federation president Jean-Pierre Escallettes did not see the banner but said it was an "unforgivable" gesture on the part of a section of the Lithuanian fans.

Most of the French players did not see it either, and some simply chose to ignore it.

"Someone told me about it but I didn't see it," said French midfielder Florent Malouda, who is from Guyana in the Caribbean.

"I was told what was on it, but I was just trying to concentrate on my match. The important thing is that our rivals didn't share the same opinion."

Another black player, William Gallas, added: "I don't know why they did it. For what reason?"

Lyon midfielder Jeremy Toulalan, who is white, said: "It's just not very intelligent. That's all I can say about it. I didn't see it either, but we all spoke about it in the dressing room."

Football's European ruling body UEFA, which comes down hard on violence and racism, could be forced to act in the coming days.

Basten to ring changes

AFP, Rotterdam

The star-studded Netherlands missed a golden opportunity to virtually seal qualification for Euro 2008 after being held to a goalless draw by determined Romania here Saturday.

The Adrian Mutu-inspired visitors threatened to cause a late upset after causing problems throughout for Marco Van Basten's team, who were jeered off the pitch despite grabbing a point to remain top of group G three points ahead of Bulgaria, who have played a game less.

Van Basten later bemoaned his side's lack of creation in the midfield and admitted he could make changes in his starting 11 for Wednesday's encounter in Slovenia.

"It wasn't a good performance, although we didn't lose," said the Dutchman.

"We had problems in the midfield, we just didn't get on top of our game there at all."

It wasn't just at the end of the game that the hosts gave their suffering fans reason to moan.

Romania, known for their ability to score on the counter-attack, produced some of the game's best goal-scoring chances in the first half, through Dorin Goian after just three minutes and Ciprian Marica in the fifth and 28th minutes.

It took the Netherlands until the 35th minute to threaten scoring a goal, Arjen Robben hitting the target but failing to beat Romania keeper Bogdan Lobont.

The Dutch pressed on with a series of attacking forays which the visitors, despite missing star defender Cristian Chivu due to a broken nose, managed to contain with relative ease.

Lobont was also up to the task when midfielders Rafael van der Vaart, in the 36th minute, and Wesley Sneijder, 10 minutes later, tried their luck at goal.

Dutch desperation for a goal became more prevalent in the second half, but essentially their game lacked the kind of depth that would allow Klaas-Jan Huntelaar to shine.

As a result the Dutch centre forward was given relatively poor service from his midfield.

Van Basten added: "We tried different solutions to push the Romanians, even playing long balls. But our three forwards just didn't get the chance to play to their potential."

"Romania are a strong team, and they're not easy to push off the ball."

In the final minute, Mutu even threatened an upset, coming close to giving the visitors a late lead.

Van Basten, one of the stars of the Dutch team which won the trophy in 1988, will be worried a few days ahead of their trip to Slovenia.

He added: "I'm confident in my team's abilities, but we will have to step up a gear if we want to beat Slovenia."

"I might have to make changes in the starting line-up but first of all I want to look at what went wrong tonight."

On Wednesday, Romania will also play host to Luxembourg while Bulgaria host Albania.

Winning start for Parreira

Football

AFP, N'djamena

Victory lifted slow starters South Africa to the top of Group 11 with seven points from three matches after a 0-0 home draw with Congo and a gritty 1-0 win in Zambia last year.

Congo host Zambia on Sunday and a two-goal win for the 'Red Devils' would lift them above Bafana Bafana because they would have scored more goals.

The 12 group winners are guaranteed places at the finals of the biennial tournament in Ghana next January and February with the best three runners-up also qualifying.

Parreira led his native Brazil to the 1994 World Cup title and quit after the defending champions made a quarterfinals exit to France in the same competition last year.

He promised South Africans

Nesta makes Milan comeback

INTERNET, undated

Alessandro Nesta and Serginho ended their injury nightmares by making their comebacks for the Milan Primavera team today and could face Roma.

"The test went well and now we are waiting for our Serie A return too," said the Italian international.

Serginho is yet to feature this season and some thought his career was over due to a serious back problem, while Nesta has been out of action for three months.

Both were fielded in Coach Filippo Galli's Primavera youth championship game against Cagliari Sunday, in which the Rossoneri won 6-0. As there is no reserve team in Italy, injured players regain fitness with the youth side.

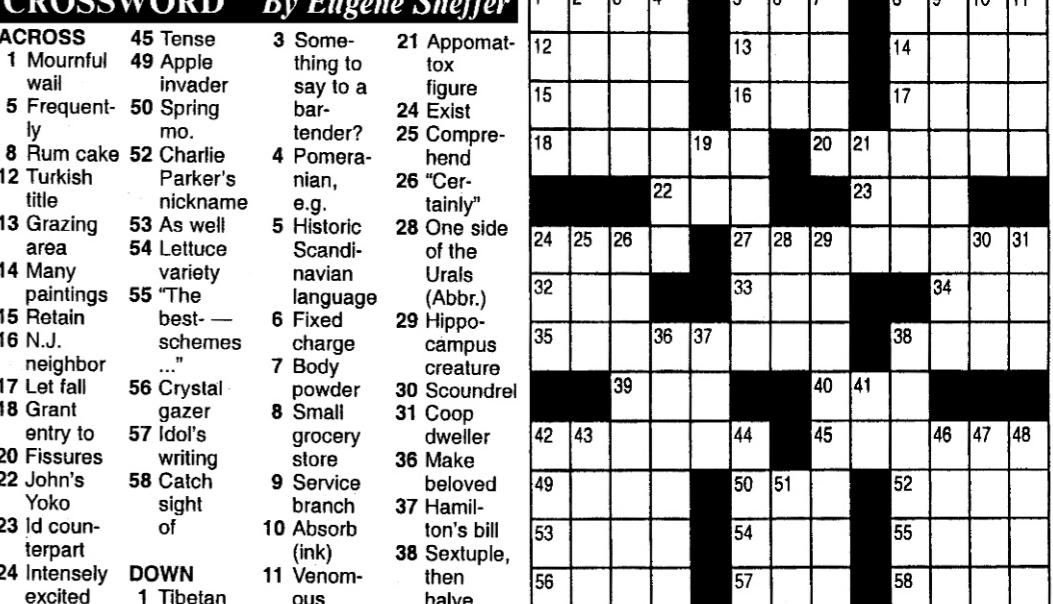
"If Carlo Ancelotti calls me, then I have no problem playing," added Nesta. "I feel ready to play and I cannot wait to extend my contract with Milan."

Ancelotti was in the stands and also seemed convinced that their injury nightmares are finally over.

"Both Nesta and Serginho went well after such long lay-offs. We will see how they work in training this week, but I believe they are ready for the game with Roma."

Spain striker Fernando Morientes points to his teammates after hitting the back of the net in their Euro 2008 qualifier against Denmark at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium in Madrid on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP



CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: CLASSIC FILM ABOUT A FELLOW ON A MISSION TO FIND THE WORLD'S BEST BREW: "THE BEER HUNTER."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals T

United swoop for Deco

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United reportedly lining up a sensational 15million pound summer swoop for Barcelona's Deco.

The Catalan giants are planning to overhaul their squad at the end of this season and according to the News of the World Sir Alex Ferguson is planning to sign the unsettled Portuguese ace.

Deco has already hinted he wants a fresh challenge after three years at the Nou Camp and it is thought that bringing him to Old Trafford would help ensure Cristiano Ronaldo pens a contract with United.

Although Ronaldo's new deal is expected to be five years, there is still disputes over the pay with the player holding out for more than 100,000 pounds per week in the summer.



A fan is captured as he tries to show his respect to Brazilian forward Ronaldinho in the dying minutes of Brazil's friendly international against Chile in Gothenburg on Saturday.