

France legend Zinedine Zidane shimmies during an indoor football match played between France 98 and Paris Saint Germain at Bercy's stadium in Paris on Sunday.

We've flopped, says Fabregas

AFP, London

English Premiership giants Arsenal's season has been a failure their stylish young Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas claimed on Sunday.

The 19-year-old told the News of the World that finishing the season without a trophy was sad and the past few weeks had been really hard after seeing themselves knocked out of the Champions League, FA Cup and losing in the League Cup final to Chelsea.

They also trail Premiership leaders Manchester United by 20 points.

"This season there will be nothing and that's hard," said Fabregas, who is one of the youngsters heralded by manager Arsene Wenger as guaranteeing the club a bright future.

"To be so many points behind United is not good enough."

"It was so disappointing to go out of the Champions League to PSV Eindhoven."

"We had the chances to beat them. After reaching the final last year I thought we could go all the way again and win it this time."

"It's hard to imagine that a few weeks ago we were still in all the competitions -- the Champions League, FA Cup and through to the League Cup final."

"But now we are out of everything," added Fabregas, who has failed to score in his 29 Premiership appearances this season.

Schuster hits out at Capello

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Fabio Capello has been heavily criticised by Getafe Coach Bernd Schuster, who might replace him on the Merengues bench.

The Italian tactician moved to Spain last year after the Calciopest scandal, but has failed to meet the expectations preceding his arrival and has grown unpopular at the Bernabeu.

President Ramon Calderon confirmed that the Coach is not set to stay next season, stating that it was a mistake to sign the former Roma and Juventus boss.

"It is practically certain that he won't Coach Real Madrid next season," Schuster told Marca.

"Capello only wants to win, no matter how that happens, and with that philosophy you cannot succeed at Real Madrid."

Schuster is one of the candidates on the Spanish giants' list of names to replace Capello, but denies that there have been any official conversations.

"I have not had any direct talks with Calderon, I only know that I am on the list of their candidates," explained the Coach.

Milan's Carlo Ancelotti, Rafa Benitez and Jose Mourinho are also reported targets as possible successors to the Pieris-born boss.

Physical Scots worry Italy

INTERNET, undated



Italy coach Roberto Donadoni expects the Azzuri to overcome Scotland's "Anglo-Saxon football" and prevail in Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier in Bari.

The world champions currently lie fourth in Group B, five points behind joint leaders France and Scotland, whose recent form has impressed former AC Milan midfielder Donadoni.

"Scotland are a very physical side, with a lot of quality in midfield," he said.

"They perfectly reflect the philosophy of Anglo-Saxon football and they never give up."

"Despite what I have seen, I will not change my strategy, in Bari we will have to impose our play from the start."

Donadoni has managed just two wins from his seven games in

charge after succeeding Marcello Lippi following Italy's World Cup triumph in Germany.

Although they are well off the pace currently, they do have a game in hand on the French and the Scots and Donadoni is refusing to panic.

He added: "I am calm. I don't feel particularly stressed. Ever since I joined the national team I have always felt pretty safe."

"My only concern is to put out an Italian side that is determined against Scotland."

"The comments about the future simply don't interest me."

Donadoni's task against Scotland will not be helped by an injury list which contains key defenders Fabio Grosso and Alessandro Nesta, while playmaker Francesco Totti is out of contention until September due to an agreement with the Italian Football Federation.

The absences add to the tension in the Italy camp with goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon admitting

the pressure is on the hosts.

"We are aware that we cannot fail," said the Juventus keeper.

"It's not going to be easy against Scotland and we know we will have to give our best. Let's not forget that we are also mentally much stronger than we were in the past."

But Buffon admits the Scots will pose a greater threat at the Stadio San Nicola than they did two years ago in Milan when a pair of Andrea Pirlo free-kicks gave the Azzurri victory in a World Cup qualifier.

He added: "Scotland have grown a lot in the past two years. We did beat them in Milan, but we still suffered."

There was one piece of good news for Donadoni on Monday with English-born midfielder Simone Perrotta passed fit after overcoming a thigh injury.

good team and they are missing a couple of important players. I'm sure it is going to be another tough match in the summer."

The Chelsea legend also picked out Fiorentina striker Giampaolo Pazzini for special attention, as he netted a record-breaking 28 second strike and a maiden hat-trick at the new Wembley.

"We are not surprised because we know how good Pazzini can be," Zola added. "On Saturday he picked up a great performance in the right place, so it will give him a lot of confidence for the future."

"We are very pleased for him because every player needs confidence, and this will be good for us in the future."

I value the England U21s game very much. I think they played very well. A couple of them were outstanding, especially David Bentley," he said. "It's probably one of the best teams we've played against so far, and certainly we learnt a lot from them."

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Zola loves new Wembley

Football

INTERNET, undated

Former Chelsea striker Gianfranco Zola has lavished praise on the new Wembley development after seeing his Italian U-21 side secure an entertaining 3-3 draw with their English counterparts on Saturday.

Zola, who is now the Italy assistant coach, was amazed at the magnitude of the new stadium and told the FA's website that he would have loved to play there himself.

"Wembley is amazing," he said. "Every footballer would like to play in this stadium. The old

one was different, and had a kind of passion that you could feel when you were walking on the pitch. But I have to say the new one is good as well in another way."

The Italian also had praise for England's young stars, and he believes it will be a tough battle when the sides come face to face again in June, this time in the U-21 European finals.

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A panoramic view of the revamped Wembley Stadium during its inaugural match between England and Italy under-21 sides on Saturday.

Kaiser praises Germans

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Franz Beckenbauer believes Germany are good enough to win Euro 2008.

Jochim Low's men are on their way to qualifying for the tournament next year after beating the Czech Republic 2-1 on Saturday to open up a three-point gap at the top of Group D.

And the Kaiser, who won the World Cup as a coach and a player, believes they are currently the best team in Europe.

"You get the impression that almost every game under Jogi Low could be used as teaching material to others," he said.

"Germany are the only team to still be at the level they were at the World Cup."

"For other big nations like Italy, France and in particular England, you can read torture into the word qualification."

"I dare to say we are the number one in Europe."

Germany are currently fifth in the FIFA World Rankings, behind European rivals Italy and France, but just ahead of England and Holland.

The Czech Republic are in ninth place, making Germany's weekend win in Prague all the more impressive.

"The game in Prague was a real gala," added Beckenbauer.

"With that 2-1 win, we are almost qualified. The win was a milestone, but the most impressive part about it was the overwhelming manner of the victory."

Less than a year since he stepped up from his position as deputy to Sven-Goran Eriksson, McClaren knows the possibility of that clause being activated has risen sharply as a result of a run in which England have managed only one goal in five games -- their worst run in 26 years.

After a goalless draw with Israel in Tel Aviv on Saturday, England have fallen five points behind Croatia, the pacesetters in their Euro 2008 qualifying group, and three adrift of Russia, who currently occupy the second qualifying spot.

With home and away games against the Russians to come, England remain masters of their own destiny and McClaren's job would appear safe at least until the trip to Estonia in June.

The former Middlesbrough man-

Rooney, McLaren at loggerheads

Football

AFP, London

Steve McClaren's days as England manager appeared numbered on Monday after details of a furious bust-up with Wayne Rooney emerged at the same time as revelations that the Football Association could sack him for a cut-price 2.5 million pounds.

According to media reports, McClaren's contract, which runs until 2010, includes a clause which allows him to be dismissed in return for a severance payment equivalent to one year's salary.

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ager will however be concerned by the apparent willingness of individuals within the Football Association, his employers, to leak confidential contractual details which can only fuel speculation that an axe will be sharpened behind the scenes.

McClaren's cause has also been helped by the first indications of a split between him and the players.

The head coach's post-match comments after Saturday night's match in Tel Aviv came close to pinning the blame on the individuals -- Wayne Rooney, Frank Lampard and Andrew Johnson -- who missed the flurry of half-chances England created late in the game having been largely outplayed for the first hour.

There were also reports of a dressing room bust-up with Rooney, who was allegedly angered by McClaren's decision to single him out for criticism in the closed-doors inquest at the Ramat Gan stadium.

Rooney reportedly stormed out of the dressing room after McClaren highlighted his failure to score a competitive goal for England since Euro 2004.

The player reportedly responded by throwing his boots and kit at the wall in frustration and the argument was so loud it could be heard in the Israel dressing room next door.

The players have not escaped some severe criticism from the press, but the media have largely focused on McClaren's inability or unwillingness to innovate tactically during the

match.

Most of the influential football writers who follow England have long since concluded that McClaren is a natural number two who has been promoted beyond his ability.

It seems England's hardcore fans, who responded to Saturday's substitution of Aaron Lennon by Stewart Downing, with a chant of 'you don't know what you're doing' have arrived at a similar conclusion and that will be worrying for the powerbrokers of the FA.

England are the most valuable brand in international football. That status has partly been built on the phenomenal global success of the Premiership, but it is also underpinned by a belief that England have good enough players to seriously challenge for a major trophy.

If that faith is questioned, the brand sufferers and signs that McClaren is floundering in his role will trigger alarm bells at FA headquarters.

With the cost of failure to reach the Euro 2008 finals estimated at up to 100 million pounds, McClaren's bosses may soon conclude that the less expensive option of a pay-off makes more sense.

Adebayor kicked out of nat'l team

Football

AFP, Lome

France coach Raymond Domenech on Sunday hit out at criticism of his side's unimpressive 1-0 win over Lithuania in their Euro 2008 qualification match saying the circumstances were far from easy.

Playing on a far-from-perfect pitch and with some notable players absent from the ranks including the injured Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira, Franck Ribery and Louis Saha, it took a 73rd-minute goal from Bolton's Nicolas Anelka to offer a reshuffled France team the valuable three points.

"The aim is to qualify for Euro 2008. We had to carve out a win over there (Lithuania), under difficult circumstances," said Domenech.

"This team is built to win. The opposition forced us to fight hard and we managed to get the upper hand of the battle physically and win."

Domenech was also full of praise for his controversial and fiery striker Anelka, who has played for eight clubs in eleven years.

"I have always got on well with him. I have never had any problems, neither with his game nor his behaviour."

"I can't comment about the past, but when he plays his top level during a match, and also scores, he fulfils everything we want of him," concluded the France handler.

France occupy second place in Group B on the same number of points as surprise group leaders Scotland and will play host to Austria on Wednesday in a friendly.

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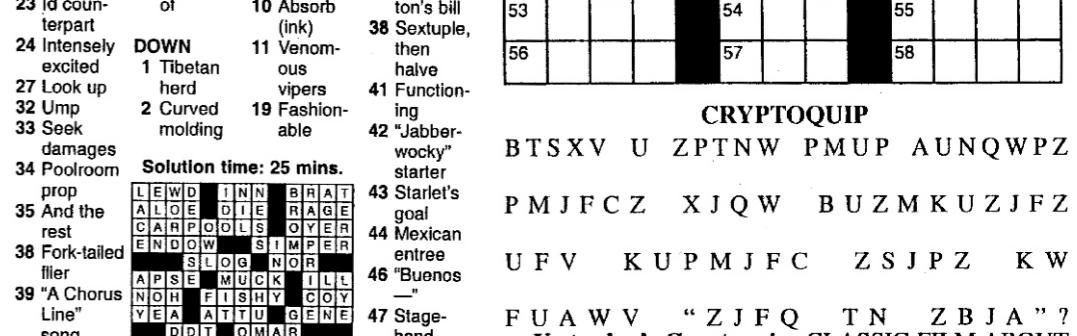
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Veteran Brazilian striker Romario of Vasco da Gama, returns with the ball to the midfield after scoring his 999th goal on Sunday during a match against Flamengo at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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