



Italy coach Roberto Donadoni (R) tackles down lynchpin Alessandro Del Piero during their afternoon session at Coverciano training ground on Monday.

Pressure on Donadoni

Roberto Donadoni's normally calm demeanour gave way to a defensive snarl as the pressure started to show on the Italy coach ahead of Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier against Scotland.

World champions Italy are five points adrift of joint Group B leaders France and Scotland with a game in hand, and anything other than a win here will leave the Azzurri's qualification hopes hanging in the balance.

It was never going to be easy for Donadoni to take charge of Italy after their triumphant World Cup campaign, with expectations that were already high reaching an almost unrealistic level.

Some Italian newspapers have reported he will be sacked if the Scots win on Wednesday, but the 43-year-old Italy coach, who took over from Marcello Lippi shortly after the World Cup, feels he and his squad are being treated unfairly.

"So many lies have been written in the last few days they could fill an encyclopedia," the former AC Milan midfielder told a news conference on Monday.

"There needs to be respect because I don't play this kind of game. If the results don't go our way, it's only right to criticise us when drawing your conclusions.

"But I don't understand why we are already on trial before the match. It's always if, if, if. Just let the team play."

The knives were out for Donadoni after Italy began their campaign with a 1-1 draw at home to Lithuania followed by a 3-1 away defeat to France, whom Italy beat on penalties in last year's World Cup final.

Donadoni dropped Del Piero for the match away to Georgia, a decision met with gasps of disbelief as the veteran striker had been in sparkling form for Juventus.

When quizzed last week about Del Piero's exclusion for that match, Donadoni replied: "Del Piero is like any other player and he knows that well."

To be so flippant about a figure the media love went down like a lead balloon, and the relationship between Donadoni and the press deteriorated.

Matters worsened when Donadoni said it will be he who decided if he picks Totti once the Roma captain has returned from his international sabbatical in September.

Italy would be up in arms if golden boy Totti did not walk straight back into the side, but Donadoni insisted he would not be pressured into picking his team.

"There are those who criticise me for my attitude, but this is the way I do things and I will not change," Donadoni said.

"I won't be conditioned by anybody. I will make my own decisions."

Scotland manager Alex McLeish, whose first game in charge was Saturday's last-gasp 2-1 win over Georgia, believes his side can make life uncomfortable for Donadoni and Italy.

"The pressure is all on Italy as they are behind in the group," he said.

"For us there is no pressure being top. If we get the results we want, it doesn't matter what anyone else does."

"This gives you a feeling of comfort and confidence."

Scotland midfielder Paul Hartley insisted his side were more than capable of leaving the San Nicola stadium with a positive result.

"We don't fear them and we feel we can get something from the game," he said.

Rogue agents curtail young careers

Thirty-four teenagers from Ivory Coast, who were promised glittering footballing careers in Europe by a rogue agent, have returned home after they were found living in the rough in Mali, an international agency said Tuesday.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said the incident was just one sign of a hidden but deeper problem in Africa with unscrupulous, self-styled agents, and lure of European football.

The parents of the 16 to 18 year-old boys, who played for a local youth club in an impoverished suburb of the capital Abidjan, were tricked into paying 300,000 CFA francs (600 dollars) so that their children would be placed in top European clubs.

Instead, the youngsters were smuggled into neighbouring Mali three months ago, the IOM said.

The group was discovered during a police raid recently, sleeping on the floor of a room of a house in the town of Sikasso, with little food, IOM spokeswoman Jemini Pandya said.

The fake agent and the president of the club they were playing for, Yopougon, were arrested and are facing criminal charges.

"There is an increasing number of young Africans who are reportedly lured to Europe with promises of wealth and fame, only to find themselves without papers, money or contracts in exploitative situations," Pandya explained.

"The dream of going to Europe is a very big one in West Africa, football is a great passion," she added.

Some of the Ivorian youngsters were said to be so mesmerised by the European game that they were desperate to become professional players and send money back home to their families.

The IOM was unable to give a more precise idea of the scale of the problem.

The agency and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) have joined forces with the Ivorian government to give the teenagers psychological support and to raise awareness about the dangers of bogus offers from rogue agents.

Ferdinand defends McClaren

Rio Ferdinand has jumped to the defence of embattled England manager Steve McClaren, insisting he is "doing all he can" to try and find a solution to England's problems.

Defender Ferdinand believes that the team and not the manager are at fault as they head to Barcelona for Wednesday's Euro 2008 qualifier bidding to end a five-game winless run against minnows Andorra.

"I think, even before the boss came in, we weren't consistently playing to our capabilities, to our potential," he said.

"Many of these players in the squad could walk into any other team in Europe - if not the world - but we've not been able to do that over a consistent period.

"The manager we've got now is doing all he can to find the answers to all the questions that arise from Sven-Goran Eriksson's era and his own period (in charge).

"But the players have got to take some responsibility as well. The manager can do it any way he wants but if we're not performing right then it's not going to happen."

"I think a lot of us haven't been performing how we perform for our clubs. It's been, here and there, high-class performances from individuals but not as a collective team."

"The first half against Sweden in the opening group of the World Cup last summer was a great performance but, other than that, there hasn't been a stand-up performance."

"It is a strange. There have been solid performances. We all strive to be the best and do as well as we can."



Ivory Coast and Chelsea superstar Didier Drogba holds his African player of the year trophy upon his arrival at Abidjan airport on Monday.

Bayern appeal Kahn ban

German giants Bayern Munich confirmed Monday they are appealing the one-match suspension imposed by European football's governing body UEFA on goalkeeper Oliver Kahn.

Kahn was suspended for 'improper conduct' and also fined 20,000 Swiss francs (12,346 euros) Thursday for his part in a heated argument with doping control officials following Bayern's 2-1 win over Real Madrid in Munich two weeks ago.

The ban keeps the veteran out of his club's Champions League quarterfinal, first leg away to AC Milan on April 3.

"I have never heard of a player being hit with such a heavy penalty for such an offence," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

Kahn had a heated argument with the doctor supervising the doping controls after he requested that the goalkeeper provide another sample because he had not been present when the first was taken.

Should Kahn's suspension be upheld, reserve Michael Rensing will be in goal for the first leg, before Kahn returns for the home leg at the Allianz Arena.

'Don't rush Owen'

Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd on Monday warned England boss Steve McClaren against rushing striker Michael Owen back from injury to lift his Euro 2008 qualifying campaign.

Owen injured his knee playing for England in the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

And the 27-year-old is targetting a return from cruciate ligament damage before the end of the season, and could line out for England's game against Estonia in June.

"He will return when it suits him and Newcastle, not England," Shepherd told the Newcastle Chronicle.

"If he's not fit for Newcastle this season, he won't be fit for England."

McClaren's side have scored only once in five international matches and Saturday's draw in Israel left England five points behind Croatia, the pace-setters in their Euro 2008 qualifying group, and three adrift of Russia, who currently occupy the second qualifying spot.

Shepherd added: "I am an England fan and I want to watch them in the Euro 2008 finals."

"But let's stop this clamour for Michael returning to play for England before it gets up a head of steam."

"The player and Newcastle United come first and he will not be rushed back just so he can play for England in the summer."

Czech team fined

The Czech football team has been fined for bad behaviour following their 2-1 defeat to Germany in Euro 2008 qualifiers at the weekend, the Czech football federation (CMFS) said on Monday.

The CMFS fined the team one million crowns (35,750 euros) for drinking and partying at a Prague hotel while celebrating the 29th birthday of defender Tomas Ujifalusi.

The CMFS said the behaviour "was incompatible with what is required of a member of the national team," adding "the players recognised they had done wrong."

Calls for the departure of Czech coach Karel Bruckner were made by the country's press on Monday following their Germany defeat.

The daily newspaper Sport, which pointed out the Czech Republic had not beaten a major international team since Euro 2004 in Portugal, said: "If the coach does not radically change the way he works and continues to ignore modern training methods, he should leave."

The Czech press said the team would have lost by a bigger margin to Germany had it not been for a good showing from keeper Petr Cech.

The Czechs, who are second in Group D behind Germany, host Cyprus on Wednesday at Liberec in the north west of the country. The other teams in the group are Republic of Ireland, Slovakia, Wales and San Marino.

We are number one: Kaiser

German legend Franz Beckenbauer insisted on Tuesday Germany are the best football side in Europe after describing last Saturday's 2-1 win over the Czech Republic last Saturday as a "landmark" result.

In his weekly column in German newspaper Bild, Beckenbauer said the victory in Prague cements Germany's status as European No. 1 and takes them a step closer to qualification for Euro 2008 in Switzerland and Austria next summer.

"I'll dare to say it. At the moment we are the No 1 team in Europe," wrote Beckenbauer after German coach Joachim Loew claimed his seventh win in eight games since taking over from Jurgen Klinsmann after last year's World Cup.

"We took the game to the Czechs and some of our play looked like a training video."

"On top of the momentum Jurgen Klinsmann built, the team are now showing signs of telepathic understanding and are functioning like a well-drilled unit."

It's a far cry from just a year ago when the 61-year-old, who won 103 caps over 12 years, was highly critical after Germany were hammered 4-1 by Italy in Florence.

Beckenbauer questioned the methods of then-coach Klinsmann and his deputy Loew which sparked huge debate in Germany.

But after the win in Prague, thanks to two goals from Schalke 04 striker Kevin Kuranyi, Beckenbauer described Loew's promotion to the head coach as a "piece of luck".

Loew, 47, enjoyed limited success in charge of VfB Stuttgart, Austria Vienna and Tyrol FC Innsbruck before his promotion, but has got Germany playing some attractive football.

"Obviously he has strong powers of persuasion amongst the squad," judged Beckenbauer.

UEFA's no nonsense to violence



AFP, Nyon

UEFA president Michel Platini stepped up his "zero tolerance" campaign against violence in European football Monday after gaining unwavering support from his executive committee.

Violence had continued despite a letter Platini sent to the last 16 clubs in the Champions League a fortnight ago, and there were incidents at the Euro 2008 qualifiers over the weekend, UEFA spokesman William Gaillard said.

"He's now going to write to the heads of the 53 federations to remind them of their duties, and the executive committee supports him on the watchword: zero tolerance for violence and those who are violent," Gaillard said.

UEFA are currently examining appeals against sanctions imposed after a mass brawl between Valencia and Inter Milan players in a Champions League tie on March 6. A ruling is expected shortly after the hearing on Wednesday.

Both clubs were fined 155,772 euros (207,223 dollars) and the players involved were suspended for periods ranging from two matches to seven months.

"UEFA, the associations and the clubs can do quite a lot when it comes to violence on the pitch and in stadiums," Gaillard explained.

"However, we can do less away from the stadiums - there we need the help of the various public order authorities."

Platini and UEFA chiefs met government and police officials from several countries last week, to discuss ways to tackle violence in and around stadiums.

More meetings are due with police officials and corruption specialists.

Gaillard drew a parallel between the killing of Colombian football player Andres Escobar after the 1994 World Cup and the death of Pakistan's cricket coach Bob Woolmer, who was found strangled during cricket's World Cup last week.

"We unfortunately have violence that is generated by things outside sport - it can be political extremism, but also corruption or illegal betting," UEFA's spokesman added.

World governing body FIFA's president Sepp Blatter warned Friday that violence on and off the pitch had driven football to a crossroads.

Blatter also raised the possibility of punishing coaches for the actions of their players.

Minnow relief for England

AFP, Barcelona

Whatever has gone wrong with England over the last six months, Steve McClaren knows he cannot put it right against Andorra here on Wednesday.

Even if England were to hit double figures against the tiny principality, the pressure on their manager would ease off only a fraction between now and his squad's next genuine test in their Euro 2008 qualifying campaign, an end-of-season trip to Estonia.

Failure to beat Andorra, against whom England scored five without reply in McClaren's first match in charge last year, is so unthinkable that the manager will be able to claim no credit from ending a winless run of five games in which his side have produced a solitary goal.

A bit of target practice at Barcelona's Olympic stadium could nonetheless serve a valuable purpose for McClaren as he seeks to rebuild the self-belief of a squad in which morale appears to be disintegrating.

In the build-up to the match, McClaren could have done without having to deny suggestions that a rift has developed between him and Wayne Rooney, whose current difficulties in recapturing his best form in an England shirt is one of the main reasons why the team's supply of goals has dried up.

McClaren dismissed the claims as "an absolute load of rubbish," insisting that Rooney is one of the players to whom he is closest.

But it was telling that the head coach did not deny that things had got heated during the dressing room inquest into Saturday's disappointing goalless draw in Israel, a reality which had in any case already been confirmed by his captain, John Terry.

Instead, McClaren implied that frank exchanges reflected a genuine willingness to address the mystery of why the likes of Rooney, Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard have, of late, rarely transformed their club form to the international stage.

"Everybody is together and knows what we have to do and we have got to start doing it," McClaren said.

Although they have slipped five points behind pacesetters Croatia and have three points to make up on

Russia, the team currently occupying group E's second qualifying spot, England do still retain control of their own destiny with seven matches left to play, four of them at the rebuilt Wembley.

The home and away fixtures against Russia look like being decisive and England's task may be eased if Croatia have already secured qualification by the time they visit London on the final night of qualifying in November.

"We still have to play Russia twice and Croatia at home," said McClaren. "It always boils down to these big games."

The former Middlesbrough has endured a torrid time at the hands of his increasingly outspoken critics in the press and among England's hardcore supporters.

It cannot have been pleasant for him to have to listen to chants of "you don't know what you're doing" or to realise he is being dubbed "McClown" with increasing regularity.

But he remains as defiantly upbeat in his confidence that he can turn things around as he was in suggesting that only poor finishing denied England victory in Tel Aviv.



England midfielder Steven Gerrard (L) is under pressure from teammate Ashley Cole during a training session at the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona on Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Bite hard

6 Filch

9 Turntable

12 Vietnam

13 Mimic

14 Prior to

15 Perfect

16 Hood's photo

18 Phases

20 Domesticate

21 Reaction to fireworks

23 In support of

24 Timber wolves

25 Acknowledge

27 Thin cookie

29 Give sparingly

31 Trans-parent

35 Trattoria offering

37 Bygone times

38 Plague

41 Intention

43 Bill

44 Eastern bigwig ...

45 ... and his ilk

47 High-muck-a-muck

49 Giggly noise

52 Shade source

53 Unwell photo

54 Large-scale protests

55 Red or Black

56 Thickness

57 Available

DOWN

1 Actor McBride

2 Possessed rags?

3 TV special, e.g.

4 Gator bowl?

5 Rice recipe

6 Papa-razzi's need

7 Comic-strip penguin

8 Cribbage scorer

9 Clinic goings-on

10 Publicity appearance

11 Appor-tions

17 Inclement

19 Grad rags?

21 Scull tool

22 Future aves

24 Wahine's gift

26 Parking-ticket holders

28 Thrash about

30 Bran flavor

32 Random criticism

33 Glass of NPR

34 Society newcomer

36 Without slack

38 Toyland types

39 "South Pacific" role

40 Greek consonant

42 Subway

45 Hot-dog holder

46 Check

48 Knowledgeable

50 Schedule abbr.

51 Kreskin's claim

Solution time: 25 mins.

YOWL OFT BABA

AGHA LEA OILS

KEEP DEL DROP

SENDIN CLEFTS

ONNO EGO

AGOB RESEARCH

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“ H T H C T W Z P M W W U Z W X . ”

Yesterday's Cryptquip: WOULD A STORE THAT MARKETS THINGS LIKE WASHBASINS AND BATHING SUITS BE NAMED "SINK OR SWIM"?

Today's Cryptquip Clue: H equals P