



HAPPY HUNTERS: Star Indian batsman Sachin Tendulkar (L), who later went on to hammer his 37th Test ton, congratulates his captain Rahul Dravid after he reached his hundred while opener Dinesh Karthik raises his bat after scoring his maiden century on the second day of the second Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTOS: STAR

Serie A kicks off Aug 26

AFP, Rome

The 2007-08 Serie A season will start on August 26, the Italian Football League (Lega-Calcio) confirmed on Friday.

The decision will not be welcomed by Italy coach Roberto Donadoni who had been hoping for the campaign to start earlier to give him more time to prepare the national team for their two Euro 2008 qualifiers in September.

The Azzurri will host France, the team they beat in last year's World Cup final, on September 8, before visiting Lithuania four days later.

Nistelrooy ends int'l exile

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid striker Ruud van Nistelrooy is to end his self-imposed exile from the national squad, according to Netherlands coach Marco van Basten.

Van Nistelrooy was dropped after the World Cup finals in Germany and the disaffected striker declined a call-up when asked to replace the injured Klaas-Jan Huntelaar in October.

"I called Ruud in October and visited him in January and both times I had the feeling that we could still work together," Van Basten told reporters.

"I phoned him now because he is in good form at Madrid and was surprised by my call."

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Moutinho stays at Sporting

INTERNET, undated

Sporting Lisbon's Joao Moutinho has signed a new long-term contract, scotching rumours he is set to join Arsenal.

The young attacking midfielder, one of Portugal's brightest prospects, has penned a deal that could keep him at the Jose Alvalade stadium until 2013, when he will be 26.

Moutinho said: "I am very happy because my objective was always to carry on at Sporting. The club decided to make me an offer and there was no problem in reaching an agreement.

"I am very happy at the club and with the challenge of Champions League football next season."

The Lisbon club also denied they had received any serious interest from the Emirates Stadium or anyone else.

"The kid is not for sale," said a club source. "Neither Arsenal nor any other club has contacted us on the subject of a transfer."

It is believed that Sporting will only let Moutinho leave if they receive a bid of 20 million euros.

McCLAREN'S U-TURN

Beckham is back

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham has been recalled to England's squad for their forthcoming matches against Brazil and Estonia.

Beckham's international career looked to be over when he was dropped by England coach Steve McClaren following last year's World Cup, but the Real Madrid midfielder has earned a surprise return after impressing for his club in recent weeks.

The 32-year-old former England captain is likely to win his 95th cap in his country's friendly against Brazil at Wembley on Friday. McClaren's team then travel to Estonia for a crucial Euro 2008 qualifier on June 6.



DAVID BECKHAM

That Estonia clash was uppermost in McClaren's thoughts as he decided to bring back Beckham. England must win in Tallinn if they are to keep alive their hopes of reaching the Euro 2008 finals and McClaren knows his job could depend on the result.

"We've got a very big game coming up," McClaren said. "We need to win and I have to pick a squad capable of doing that. That's why I've included David.

"I've looked at David over recent months and since Christmas his form has been very good. I think he can help us win against Estonia.

"As time has gone on I felt we needed experience for the Estonia game. David provides that and he's in very good form. The team needs that.

"It is my decision and it is the decision I think is best for England to produce a winning team that the fans can be proud of."

It is 288 days since McClaren marked his arrival as England manager by dumping Beckham in an attempt to distance himself from his predecessor Sven Goran Eriksson's - to whom he was assistant-reign.

The move was widely praised at the time as Beckham had consistently failed to influence matches at the World Cup and European Championships.

When Beckham announced in January that he had agreed to join American Major League Soccer team LA Galaxy at the end of the season, it seemed he was calling time on his career as a top level player.

But McClaren's increasingly desperate bid to get England's Euro 2008 qualifying campaign back on track has led the beleaguered boss to swallow his pride and turn to Beckham.

Whether Beckham will stay in the squad once he leaves Real Madrid remains to be seen and McClaren said: "That's in the future, we've got to win in the short term, and concentrate on the next 10 days.

"David comes as David Beckham the player, that's what we want. We want him on the field doing what we know David can do.

"He was absolutely delighted as I knew he would be. He's been a total professional and he's coming into form at the right time."

Beckham's presence overshadowed Michael Owen's return to the squad for the first time in almost a year. The Newcastle striker has finally recovered from a knee injury, suffered during the World Cup in Germany, that kept him out for nearly the whole season.

McClaren happy for Owen

AFP, Burnley

England coach Steve McClaren backed Michael Owen to reclaim his best form on the international stage after the Newcastle striker made his first England appearance for almost 12 months in the 3-1 'B' international win against Albania in Burnley on Friday.

Two goals from Middlesbrough winger Stewart Downing and one from Manchester United striker Alan Smith were enough to beat the Albanians, who scored through the impressive Besart Berisha.

But although Owen, sidelined for ten months with a cruciate ligament injury, failed to find the back of the net, McClaren insisted he was delighted with the former Liverpool star ahead of next month's double header against Brazil and Estonia.

McClaren said: "It would have been good for Michael to cap his night off with a goal, but his overall performance was good and he linked the play very well.

"The icing on the cake that the goal would have brought was missing, though.

"It was tremendous for him to

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Nesta to quit Azzurri

INTERNET, undated

Alessandro Nesta has hinted he will retire from international football in order to focus more on Milan.

"If I want to continue at the highest level for many more years, then I have to make some choices. Leaving the Nazionale is one of them," he told "Tuttosport."

The defender has never been very fortunate with the Azzurri, as he missed most of the 2002 and 2006 World Cups with injury.

Nesta was sidelined for four months this season after undergoing surgery for a dislocated shoulder, but his return to fitness proved an important boost in the Rossoneri's Champions League triumph.

Now 31, the former Lazio star is contracted to Milan until 2011 and could follow teammate Paolo Maldini in taking an early retirement from the Italy squad.

Another Rossoneri hero, Gennaro Gattuso, is putting the Azzurri first. He pledged to dye his hair blonde if Milan won the Champions League, but pointed out he will only do so after the Euro 2008 qualifiers against Lithuania and the Faroe Islands.

"I can go around like that in Italy, but if I go overseas people will think I am insane," said the midfielder.

Owen makes return

Football

THE INDEPENDENT

It was billed as the Michael Owen show - or rather a trial given his fitness - but England were dealt an unwanted sub-plot last night as they lost Aaron Lennon to injury, with a twisted knee, while winning an entertaining encounter against Albania. Lennon's replacement, Stewart Downing scored twice, but England were denied the chance of allowing the Spurs winger to play down the left, a role possibly allotted to him to accommodate the return of David Beckham.

Conversely, Lennon's departure, and although it appeared precautionary he will go for a scan today, may increase the prospects of Beckham playing. However it was the performance of another wide man and another DB wearing that No 7 shirt - David Bentley - and someone who head coach Steve McClaren said had the "arrogance and assurance to be an England player" that caught the eye. The limited nature of the opposition, whose coach Otto Baric insisted was every bit as much a B line-up as the home side, should not be air-brushed.

But importantly Owen completed the full 90 minutes and

although lacking both fitness and - crucially - confidence appeared to do enough to be named today in McClaren's squad. "It's like coming into a new period with a team and you have a new signing and that new signing is Michael Owen," said McClaren who confirmed his squad would be bigger than normal and that it had been selected prior to this game. "He's come on a lot this week but I don't think we can expect too much from Michael. He still has a long way to go."

And it's taken a long time so far. It was 20 June last year that he crawled from the turf in Cologne, his World Cup in tatters, before spending months having his knee and his career rebuilt. McClaren has spoken about him being fitter and stronger but he's certainly not sharp enough yet to warrant a prominent role and fluffed a clear chance in side-footing wide after being teed up by Lennon in the opening minutes.

For a while it proved an illusionary moment as England quickly surrendered the initiative to the Albanians. McClaren spoke of his enjoyment in watching the "enthusiasm and energy" of his players but they were, at times, over-run in midfield with Besart Berisha the half's best performer. He thudded a 25-yard shot against the cross-bar and scored just before the interval, after embarrassing Ledley King,

but by then England had struck twice.

Both goals came from crosses. For the first Nicky Shorey, an encouraging debutant, centred and Gareth Barry, an otherwise disappointment, alertly laid the ball back to Alan Smith who had cleverly pulled away to the edge of the penalty area. His low right-footed shot was powerful and accurate and beat goalkeeper Arjan Begaj. Amid the attention placed on Owen it's been overlooked at just how Smith has re-built his own career, from an even more horrendous injury, and this was his first appearance for his country since October 2005.

Albania would have gone in level had Alban Bushi showed more drive than to hit a shot weakly at Scott Carson after Phil Neville's terrible header had left the England defence out-numbered. But, into the second-half, England were dominant. They scored a third when Owen slipped the ball neatly to Downing who deftly chipped it beyond Begaj.

There were other chances too, but a flurry of substitutions killed all semblance of what had been an enjoyable contest. Not that McClaren will care. It was a rare evening of respite for the coach who knows that, today, the focus will become a lot sharper.

By an accident

SIMON BARNES



On Wednesday night, AC Milan beat Liverpool by accident. As a result, they won the Champions League. Just think of it: the biggest prize in European football went to Milan because a ball accidentally hit a chap.

It was a free kick from Andrea Pirlo, well struck, and Filippo Inzaghi made a run in its general direction. That much was intentional. But he didn't strike the ball. The ball struck him. It hit him round about the shoulder or upper arm. No, that doesn't make it handball. The process was entirely inadvertent. If anything, he was trying to get out of the way. But the result of this little swerving half-duck was to propel the ball into the net; and the game changed for ever as a result.

You can, if you like, say that Milan deserved it on the balance of play, but I'm not so sure that's right. Liverpool had the better of the first half, in terms of shots on goal, and if Milan were better in the second half, that was because the goal had changed everything. Well, you can say that Milan were the better side on the night and that their second goal was a thing of perfection, but the game had changed because Milan had scored by accident.

That accident makes them the best team in Europe: champions, monarchs of all they survey. Eight months of striving by 32 of the finest teams on the Continent, preceded by a season's striving by a few hundred more, and it all comes

down to a chap being accidentally hit by the ball.

And that's luck. The ball might have rebounded high, or wide, or straight at a defender. It might have missed Inzaghi altogether and been comfortably saved. It might any bloody thing you want, but the fact is that Milan are the best team in Europe by accident. Take nothing away from their victory, as football people like to say, generally meaning the exact opposite. The point is that luck is an irrefragable aspect of football.

It evens itself over the long haul. No one wins the Premiership by means of that kind of luck. You can have bad luck with injuries, as Chelsea did with Petr Cech this season, but that sort of thing also levels itself out over a season. Manchester United had an injury crisis of their own. In football, luck can change a game, it can't really change a season.

So if you want to rule luck out of the equation in football, the one thing you must do is to make sure that big prizes are never awarded on the events of a single match. And that is precisely what football does not do. Football goes to great lengths to do the exact opposite: to devise competitions that are decided by means of one great occasion.

Of the four trophies available to a Premiership club in Europe, three are decided by a single match. There are two great prizes available to a European national side, and both the World Cup and the European Championship are decided by a one-off fixture. The great prize can go to a side who, at the crucial moment, get lucky.

This fantastically high value placed on simple luck is more or

less unique to football. Sure, you can have flukes in all sports, but there is no other sport in which a fluke can change the destiny of a match and a championship so often and so drastically. You can win a point on a net-cord in tennis, but that doesn't often happen on championship point. No match changes for ever because the ball landed this side, or the other side.

You can get lucky bounces in rugby. But it is very, very seldom that a lucky bounce decides the destiny of a match, still less a trophy. In both codes of rugby, there is a disconcerting tendency for the stronger side to win and the weaker side to lose. Golf, yes, a capricious bounce can take a ball into the water or, alternatively, not into the water. But over 72 holes, it's unlikely that a single freakish moment will decide a major championship.

In snooker, you can get some spectacular flukes: potting the ball from an escape shot, or potting the ball at one end after missing at the other. That can decide a frame, but over, say, 35 frames, a fluke isn't going to make all that much difference. You can lose your wicket unluckily in cricket, be on the wrong end of a decision or deflect a wide one into your stumps. But you have invariably got to take 20 wickets to win a Test match and it's seldom, if ever, that defeat comes down to bad luck.

In horse racing you can have bad luck in running and, as a result, you can lose the hugest of prizes. You can lose the Derby because you got caught in traffic in the first two furlongs. But avoiding such things is the jockey's job. You very

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PHOTO: AFP

French icon Zinedine Zidane (R) plays football with disabled children in the southern town of Marseille on Saturday during a charity match to support European association "Ela" against Myelin.

INTERNET, undated



Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos and Roberto Carlos have both said that clubs are being given cash incentives to beat title and drop rivals.

With the race for the Liga crown and the battle to avoid relegation hotting up and likely to be settled by the head-to-head rule, Ramos refused to deny rumours of Real and Barca offering teams huge bonuses for beating the other.

"Although no one admits it, I

think there are briefcases being handed around," Spain defender Ramos declared.

Real are alleged to have given cash to Getafe to beat Barcelona on Saturday, and even more controversially are supposed to have offered Zaragoza an incentive to beat Sevilla on Sunday - with Real set to face the UEFA Cup chasers later this season.

"If Zaragoza beat Sevilla on Sunday, they will secure a UEFA Cup spot and we will not have a tough match against them the following weekend," Roberto Carlos admitted.

And Depor striker Riki responded in agreement:

"It would be ridiculous to deny

that these payments exist in Spanish football."

Payments, however, do not guarantee a win, with the rumour one side once offering another millions of euros to get at least a point against Barcelona in 2005 unrealised when the eventual champions won anyway.

Any one of four sides could win the Liga title, with Real leading Barcelona on account of a better standing between the two, Sevilla two points behind in third and Valencia four behind in fourth with three games left. At the other end of the table, anyone from Osasuna in 14th to second-bottom Celta Vigo could go down, with Nastic all-but condemned to the drop.