

Fiorentina hold Milan

AFP, Rome



AC Milan's joy at winning the European Super Cup last Friday was doused on Monday as they were held 1-1 by

Fiorentina in their Serie A clash.

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Milan - who beat Sevilla 3-1 on Friday in Monaco - looked to be on their way to joining AS Roma and Juventus at the top of the table when Brazilian star Kaka scored from the penalty spot - his third goal of the season - in the 27th minute.

However fatigue seemed to set in the second-half for the Milanese and Fiorentina took advantage as former Chelsea striker Adrian Mutu headed the equaliser in the 56th minute.

Milan pushed forward looking for a winner but found Fiorentina's

French

goalkeeper

Sebastien

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"I am always angry when we don't get the maximum points, but in this case we did everything we possibly could," he said.

"We tried to win and ran quite a few risks, but so soon after our last game it was understandable we had some difficulties."

"After that equaliser we took back the initiative and wanted the victory, so we poured forward and became a little unbalanced, but I cannot fault my team for anything. We faced a strong side that were organised, fresh and made life difficult for us." At times we poured forward in waves without a great deal of patience or organisation, but at least that is a sign of a team with heart."

Fiorentina coach Cesare Prandelli put his team's comeback down to a change of tactics after the break.

"We changed our approach in the second half. At the end of the first period we told ourselves that continuing that way would probably lead to us conceding a second, so we may as well push the defence

further up the field," he said.

"It is true we allowed a few more counter-attacks that way, but when you come to Milan you have to attack and take advantage of the space."

The result meant that both sides moved onto four points, two off joint leaders Juventus and Roma.

But Prandelli saw enough to suggest that his team could keep pace with the top sides this season.

"We are convinced that over time we will be rewarded for our work, because I have some quality players who need patience. Games like this give you the confidence that you can believe in your chances," he said.

And Mutu has grasped his chance at leading the line since Luca Toni's defection to Bayern Munich.

"He gives extra value to the squad, has class and character," added Prandelli of Mutu. "He has great vision and we are very happy to have him here. I hope he repeats the wonderful things he did last season, although in my view he can do even better."



PHOTO: AFP

England sweat on trio

Football

AFP, London

England's preparations for their upcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel and Russia suffered a fresh setback on Tuesday when a combination of illness and injury forced John Terry, Steven Gerrard and Owen Hargreaves to sit out the squad's first training session.

Head coach Steve McClaren is already resigned to being without Frank Lampard for at least the Israel match on Saturday and was forced to leave the injured David Beckham and Wayne Rooney out of his squad altogether.

Lampard tore a thigh muscle in training for Chelsea on Friday and will have a fitness test on the day of Israel match to see if there is any chance of him featuring against Russia on the following Wednesday.

England desperately need to win both matches if they are to get their bid to reach the finals in Austria and Switzerland next year back on track.

McClaren's squad is currently languishing in fourth place in group E, from which only the top two teams will qualify.

With Lampard out, Gerrard's

presence will be even more important than usual for England. But the Liverpool midfielder has played only once since breaking a toe against Toulouse three weeks ago and his club manager, Rafael Benitez, has voiced anxiety over the danger of whether Gerrard can realistically feature in both matches.

Gerrard is determined to play but he was restricted to gym work on Tuesday as the rest of the squad got down to work at Arsenal's training complex just to the north of the capital.

Both Terry, who is also suffering from a broken toe and reported for duty on Sunday night feeling under the weather, and Hargreaves, who has been struggling with tendinitis in a knee, are expected to be fully involved on Wednesday.

Part of Tuesday's session saw

McClaren examine his options in attack with Emile Heskey, Andrew Johnson and Jermain Defoe all tried out alongside Michael Owen, who was wearing heavy strapping on his right wrist.

Heskey, who was given an unexpected late call-up on Saturday, has not played for England since the Euro 2004 finals.

But the 29-year-old is being tipped for a starting slot against Israel because of a belief that he can bring out the best in Owen.

Although Heskey has a modest international record of five goals in 43 appearances, it has been noted that Owen has scored 11 times in the 12 international matches in which he and Heskey started together.

Critics of Heskey have frequently suggested that he lacks the self-confidence or touch of arrogance required to be a really effective striker, but the Wigan forward insists he is ready to grasp his second chance on the international stage.

"I had no idea I was under consideration by the manager and it's a great chance to show I'm good enough," he said.

"If I get the chance I will prove it. I don't have any doubt - why should I?"

Heskey is looking forward to hooking up with Owen once more. "Of course Michael and I are different players, there's no doubt about that," added the former Liverpool striker.

"I know how he plays and we've proved we can play together. We complement each other's games. He is a quality striker and he is there to get goals.

"We saw what kind of player he is on Saturday when he scored for Newcastle in the last minute against us.

"He has the ability to pop up from nowhere to score goals, but my strengths are in other areas of the pitch."

Provided Gerrard and Hargreaves are fit, McClaren looks likely to start with Shaun Wright-Phillips on the right of midfield and

Joe Cole on the left.

Cole has struggled to make the

Chelsea starting line-up of late but

McClaren insisted that he still

regarded the midfielder as a first-

choice player.

"He hardly played for us last season (due to injury) and we missed him," McClaren said. "He showed how important he was to us in the summer when he came back against Estonia and scored. I have made a point to him about his performances and he know what he has to do."

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Sevilla into group phases

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Domenech ban upheld

AFP, Nyon

UEFA on Tuesday rejected France coach Raymond Domenech's appeal against a one-match ban, four days before his team face World Cup final rivals Italy in a Euro 2008 qualifying clash.

European football's governing body had slapped the ban on Domenech last month for bringing the game into disrepute, following comments he made in a newspaper suggesting that an under-21 international match in 1999 had been rigged.

UEFA's appeals body decided, however, to lift a 10,000 Swiss Francs (8,000 dollars) fine on the French national team coach, UEFA spokesman Thomas Giordano said.

Domenech refused to comment after he left the hearing at UEFA's headquarters in Switzerland, saying "I don't know" in response to journalists' questions.

In a newspaper interview in August, Domenech alluded to a "referee being bought" during a tie between France and Italy's under-21 sides in 1999. He was the coach of the junior French team at the time.

A suspended coach is banned

from the touchline and the dressing

rooms during a match but can watch

as a spectator in the stadium and give instructions by mobile telephone.

In the second half, Sevilla moved further ahead in the 53rd minute through Alexander Kerzhakov through a goal from veteran Brazilian star Rivaldo, who plied his trade in Spain for many years, first with Deportivo La Coruna and then Barcelona.

Sevilla will now face Arsenal, Slavia Prague and Steaua Bucharest in the group stages while AEK will play in the UEFA Cup.

Ballack in the cold

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Michael Ballack was brought to Chelsea by Roman Abramovich to win the Champions League but the German midfielder will not feature in this season's group stage, after the London club omitted him from the squad list that they submitted to Uefa last Friday. They based the decision on the likelihood that Ballack will not be fit for the majority of the group phase games" as he continues his rehabilitation from the ankle operation he underwent on July 3, having first had surgery to address the problem on April 27. But the news still caused shock, particularly as the German manager, Joachim Loew, said yesterday that he hoped to have Ballack, his captain, available for the European Championship qualifying tie against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin on October 13.

Chelsea would only have played two of their six Group B ties by then. Thereafter, they have the double header against Schalke and the trip to Rosenborg before they finish, on December 11, with Valencia at home. Loew said: "[Ballack's] injury is over now, it's becoming better from day to day. It's important that he gets a basic physique for the season. His coach at Chelsea must decide when he comes back [but] we hope that he will return to our team for the Euro qualifier against the Republic of Ireland."

Chelsea insisted nothing sinister should be read into the decision. The club could have named a 25-man squad but three would have had to be "locally trained" and since only the captain, John Terry, fits that criterion they named a squad of 23.

Cubs can add up to three new

eligible players for the knockout stages of the competition which begin on February 19 - the deadline for registration is February 1 - and Chelsea argue that Ballack would come into the reckoning then, having not deprived the club of a fully fit player in the meantime. The move was said to have been agreed with the blessing of Ballack and Jose Mourinho, the manager.

It is difficult to ignore the suspicion that Ballack had been left out until the closure of the winter transfer window on January 31 with a view to keeping his value high for a

but had not entirely captured the imagination and had fallen short in the Champions League. Yet Ballack, together with Shevchenko, provoked a degree of suspicion in the dressing room. His contract, which runs until the end of next season, pays him £121,000 a week and that proved a source of resentment.

Mourinho prioritises a collective work ethic and he struggled to fit Ballack into his team. Ballack started 23 of Chelsea's 38 Premier League fixtures last time out, although he was seemingly an automatic choice in the Champions League, starting in every tie until his ankle injury ruled him out of the semifinal defeat at the hands of Liverpool.

It was the injury that sparked confrontation. He damaged the left ankle at Newcastle on April 22 and, having been assessed by Chelsea's medical staff, returned to Germany and had surgery. He felt that Chelsea had failed to detect a piece of floating bone above the ankle, a claim which was angrily rejected. Chelsea were furious at the timing of the operation, coming as it did before the Champions League semifinal and crucial Premier League matches.

Mystery clings to Ballack's injury. Hans-Wilhelm Muller-Wohlfahrt, the renowned German doctor, referred him for surgery in July and it was believed the procedure was relatively minor. Yet the 30-year-old has not played since. Chelsea were unhappy that Ballack did not travel with them on their close-season tour to the US, while speculation surrounded his future when he was linked with a move to Real Madrid. Ballack insisted that he was "totally committed to Chelsea". Both sides, however, appear to have a parting in mind.

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McClaren's need to have Gerrard available is obvious.

Earmarked for a central midfield berth, Gerrard's importance is even more acute given the absence of Frank Lampard.

Even with the addition of Emile Heskey, there is a distinct lack of proven goalscoring ability in McClaren's squad and no-one has forgotten how Gerrard virtually single-handedly dragged the Three Lions to victory over Andorra in March.

Knowing England's final five qualifiers will lead only to the sack if results do not go his way, McClaren has adopted a 'get-tough' policy in his dealings with clubs.

While Andrew Johnson, Alan Smith and Jermain Defoe have their own merits, Heskey does look set to step into the breach against Israel on Saturday, when Peter Crouch will be suspended.

Even if he does not score himself, Heskey's sheer bulk should, in theory, keep an Israeli defence marshalled by Tal Ben Haim fully occupied, allowing Michael Owen, Gerrard and Joe Cole to profit.

Cole has questioned how valuable McClaren feels he is to the England cause having substituted the Chelsea man against Germany last month.

However, it appears Cole

No Crespo for Argentina

AFP, Buenos Aires

Inter Milan striker Hernan Crespo has withdrawn from Argentina's squad to play Australia in a friendly next week in Melbourne.

Crespo, who has not fully recovered from an injury picked up during the Copa America in Venezuela, will not be replaced in the squad.

Coach Alfio Basile has also had to face up to two other squad pull-outs: Atletico Madrid midfielder Maxi Rodriguez (groin) and Getafe defender Daniel Diaz (personal reasons).

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Roberto Abbondanzieri (Getafe/ESP), Oscar Ustari (Getafe/ESP), Sergio Romero (AZ Alkmaar/NED)

Defenders: Gabriel Heinze (Real Madrid/ESP), Gabriel Milito (Barcelona/ESP), Fabricio Coloccini (Deportivo La Coruna/ESP), Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan/ITA), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter Milan/ITA), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich/GER)

Middlefielders: Fernando Gago (Real Madrid/ESP), Jonas Gutierrez (Mallorca/ESP), Javier Mascherano (Liverpool/ENG), Cristian Ledesma (Olympiakos/GRE), Federico Insua (America/MEX)

Strikers: Javier Saviola (Real Madrid/ESP), Lionel Messi (Barcelona/ESP), Sergio