

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.

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 Frey equal to the task of both Filippo Inzaghi and Kaka's efforts.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said he was disappointed not to wrap up the three points but admitted that the task of playing twice in such a

short space of time had affected his players.

"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."



Milan's star midfielder Kaka (C) is surrounded by Fiorentina players during their Serie A clash at the San Siro in Milan on Monday.

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 knows what he has to do."

Sevilla into group phases

AFP, Athens

Sevilla paid a fitting tribute to former full-back Antonio Puerta by storming into the Champions League group phase with a 4-1 win over AEK Athens here on Monday night.

That completed a 6-1 aggregate victory for the Spaniards in a match that was delayed following the untimely death of the Spanish international full-back last week from multiple organ failure following a cardiac arrest during a league match just days earlier.

Double reigning UEFA Cup champions Sevilla had the match and the tie sewn up by half-time after romping into a 3-0 lead.

Two goals from Brazilian striker Fabiano, one from the penalty spot and a goal from Seydou Keita had the Andalusians slipping into cruise control.

In the second half, Sevilla moved further ahead in the 53rd minute through Alexander Kerzhakov before AEK managed a late consolation 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.

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.

France face Italy in Milan on Saturday in the key Euro 2008 qualifying group match and for one of the players at least, Lassana Diarra, Domenech's absence changes nothing.

"We'll prepare in the same way,"

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Ballack in the cold

Football

THE GUARDIAN

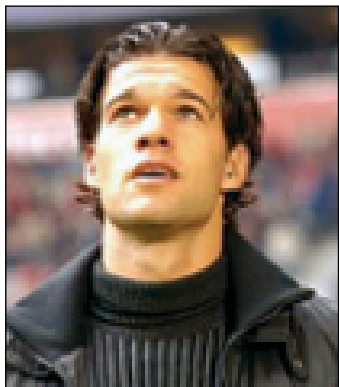
Michael Ballack was brought to Chelsea by Roman Abramovich to win the Champions League but the Germany midfielder will not feature in this season's group stage, after the London club omitted him from the squad list they submitted to Uefa last Friday. They based the decision on the likelihood that Ballack 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 Germany 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 base physically 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. Clubs 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



MICHAEL BALLACK

potential sale. Players who appear in the Champions League become cup-tied and command significantly less in the market.

Ballack has had a chequered career at Stamford Bridge, since arriving on a Bosman free transfer from Bayern Munich in May 2006. He was billed as a "galactico" signing, together with Andriy Shevchenko, and Abramovich's fingerprints were on both deals. The billionaire owner felt compelled to inject some fantasy into Mourinho's squad that had won back-to-back Premier League titles

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.

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)

Midfielders: 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 Aguero (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Carlos Tevez (Manchester United/ENG)

FIFA to inspect Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

A delegation of FIFA officials will arrive here Monday to assess the country's capacity to host visitors for the 2010 World Cup to be hosted in South Africa.

"The FIFA officials will assess the capacity of Zimbabwe to host visitors for 2010," Karikoga Kaseke, chief executive officer of the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA), said in a statement.

"They have specifically requested to see three- to five-star hotels in Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls as well as other service facilities in the tourism sector."

Zimbabwe, which plans to invest 20 million US dollars on hotels and stadiums, is one of the host country's neighbours expecting to rake in the windfall of the month-long event by hosting training camps, accommodation and fan parks for teams and visitors during the tournament.

A report drawn up by the sports and environment ministries, which has been adopted by President Robert Mugabe's cabinet, called for a comprehensive refurbishment programme of hotels which have seen a marked drop in foreign visitors since the implosion of the economy. A new stadium is also in the pipeline.

The FIFA delegation will also be looking at issues such as ports of entry, customs and immigration, transport, as well as touring possibilities and activities, Kaseke added.

"We will not leave anything to chance. We have to make sure that the industry standards are brought up to expectations of FIFA," he said.

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PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla striker Alexander Kerzhakov (C) dedicates his goal to deceased teammate Antonio Puerta during their Champions League qualifying encounter against AEK Athens at the Olympic Stadium in Athens on Monday.

'Don't risk Gerrard'

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has pleaded with his England counterpart Steve McClaren not to risk star midfielder Steven Gerrard for two crunch Euro 2008 qualifiers, unless he is fully fit.

England play Israel and Russia at Wembley on September 8 and 12 respectively but they have a huge doubt hanging over Gerrard.

He is recovering from a broken toe and missed Liverpool's 6-0 thrashing of Derby at the weekend.

But Gerrard assured McClaren he will be fit for the Euro 2008 double-header, something which has his club manager worried.

"We have not taken any risks with Steven at Liverpool and I would not expect England to take any risks with him," said Benitez.

"We do not want Steven to play for England with any painkilling injections. We did that against Chelsea and it took four to five days for him to recover to be able to train again."

With England requiring a minimum of four points from the two Wembley games to retain a realistic hope of reaching next summer's finals in Austria and Switzerland,

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

remains a firm favourite and a virtual certainty to retain his spot on the left-hand side of McClaren's midfield.

"Joe is very valuable to England," said McClaren. "He hardly played for us last season and we missed him."

"He showed how important he is when he came back against Estonia in the summer and scored. I have made a point to him about his performances and he knows what he has to do."

Meanwhile, McClaren has called Everton defender Joleon Lescott into his squad for the first time as a replacement for hamstring injury victim Sol Campbell.

Lescott was disappointed to be overlooked in the first place after impressing for England B against Albania at the end of last season.

But, having impressed during Everton's excellent start to the campaign, and scoring the last-minute winner at Bolton on Saturday, the former Wolves star was an obvious choice once Campbell pulled out yesterday.

"Joleon has been looking very solid for Everton this season, and has also scored a couple of goals," McClaren told www.thefa.com "He is big and strong and is a threat at set-pieces as well."