



PHOTO: AFP

Italians strikers Luca Toni (L) and Alessandro Del Piero walk to training at the federal technical centre in Florence on Tuesday. Italy will play France in a Euro 2008 qualification match in Milan on Saturday.

Award for Schumacher

AFP, Madrid

Germany's seven-time Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher was on Wednesday awarded one of Spain's highest honours, the Prince of Asturias prize for sports, organizers said.

Schumacher, 38, was chosen because his record "had turned him into a sports legend and the racer who has won the most trophies in the history of the sport" as well as for his charity work, said the jury that awards the sports prize.

"His generosity with the poor has transcended the borders of his country, a fact which was taken into account by the jury," it added in a statement.

Schumacher gave 1.15 million euros (1.56 million US dollars) to UN cultural organization UNESCO in 2005 and 10 million US dollars one year later to help the victims of the earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia, the jury noted.

After winning two championships with Benetton, Schumacher moved to Ferrari in 1996 where he won five consecutive drivers' titles with them. He retired last year but

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Wiese slams nat'l coach

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen goalkeeper Tim Wiese slammed Germany's head coach Joachim Loew on Wednesday for overlooking him while second-choice shot-stopper Timo Hildebrand struggles to get a game at Valencia.

Wiese, 25, is effectively no higher than fifth-choice German goalkeeper after Schalke 04's Manuel Neuer was summoned for fitness testing in Cologne alongside the 22-man squad for Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier against Wales.

With Arsenal's Jens Lehmann as Germany's first-choice shot-stopper, Hildebrand is just ahead of Hanover's Robert Enke in the pecking order for the reserve goalkeeper role, with Neuer confirmed as fourth and Wiese off the radar.

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Pepe out with thigh injury

AFP, Lisbon

Real Madrid defender Pepe is out of Portugal's Euro 2008 qualifiers against Serbia and Poland on September 8 and 12 respectively with a thigh injury, Portugal's doctor said Tuesday.

The Brazilian-born centre-back was due to make his first appearance under Portugal's colours since obtaining dual nationality.

But he was injured during a Real training session on August 30 and has returned to the Spanish champions for treatment.

Portugal's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has yet to name a replacement.

Ballack befuddled

AFP, Cologne

Michael Ballack does not understand his club Chelsea's decision to axe him from their Champions League squad for the group stages, Germany's head coach Joachim Loew revealed on Wednesday.

Ballack, 30, is hoping to return soon from April's ankle surgery, but misses Germany's Euro 2008 qualifier against Wales on Saturday, the friendly with Romania next Wednesday and has now been left out of Chelsea's plans.

Having this week been axed from Chelsea's Champions League squad for the autumn's group stages, Germany's captain is baffled, according to Loew, adding to rumours in the British press Ballack could be on the way out of Stamford Bridge.

"I discussed it with Michael and

he could not fully explain Chelsea's decision to me," said Loew in a press conference on Wednesday ahead of Saturday's Group D Euro 2008 qualifier.

"Chelsea's doctors estimate he will not be able to play for two to three more months, but Michael is much more optimistic and expects to play sooner.

"For us, Chelsea's decision isn't justifiable," added Loew who plans to recall Ballack for October's Euro 2008 internationals with the Czech Republic and the Republic of Ireland.

Ballack, one of Germany's world-class players, has a superb international record for midfielder with 35 goals from 77 internationals and Loew wants his captain back on the field as soon as possible.

But this is not the first time Chelsea and the German camp have not seen eye-to-eye this summer.

The English giants were unhappy when Ballack flew back to

Munich in April and, on the advice of German doctors, had an operation after picking up the ankle injury in a Premier League match.

The surgery ruled Ballack out of Chelsea's Champions League semi-final, plus the FA Cup final, and the English club felt Ballack was prioritising Germany's June internationals with San Marino and Slovakia above their schedule.

Ballack insisted the operation was crucial and ended the debate when he insisted: "Anybody saying that this operation was done because I was looking at the two Germany games in the beginning of June has to be kidding," he said at the time.

"That's complete stupidity. Name me one player on earth who would risk not playing in the FA Cup final against Manchester United or not playing in a Champions League semi-final against Liverpool because of a Euro 2008 qualifier against San Marino."

Riquelme back for Villarreal

INTERNET, undated

Juan Roman Riquelme returned to training with the Villarreal squad on Tuesday morning after spending two weeks playing catch up on his own.

The Argentinian midfielder was given an extended summer break after playing in the Copa America and has spent the past two months waiting to see what his future holds.

He is due to hold a press conference to air his thoughts on returning to El Madrigal and it remains to be seen whether he is prepared to make peace and play or remain in the stands until January.

After deals to join Atletico de Madrid and Boca Juniors failed to materialise, the former FC Barcelona playmaker has been recalled to the Villarreal set-up.

Due to his late return, Riquelme missed the start of pre-season and has spent the last fortnight training with a coach on his own in order to be ready for the new season.

Despite being put on the transfer list by the Yellow Submarine, the club agreed that if he did not find a new team by the close of the transfer window then he would become a regular member of their squad.

The Spanish deadline came and went on Friday and the same happened in Argentina on Monday without any successful move for Riquelme being completed.

After falling out with the

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'Great season ahead'

INTERNET, undated



Man of the moment Wesley Sneijder has pledged to make this a season to remember for Real Madrid fans.

Sneijder has been a huge hit in the first two games of the Premier League season, scoring three times in the victories over Atletico Madrid and Villarreal to help Real to the top of the standings.

The current feeling of euphoria around the Bernabeu is a far cry from only a few weeks ago when the reigning Spanish champions were under the spotlight following a poor pre-season, which saw them lose six of their 10 matches.

But the mood is considerably different now, with Real not only winning but also producing exciting attacking soccer, and Sneijder - one

of eight summer signings to join Real this summer following his big-money move from Ajax - is predicting good times ahead for the club's supporters.

"Our followers are going to enjoy this year with the team," he said. "We need to win, but the objective of everyone is to play nice football. I like to make the fans at the Bernabeu enjoy the games.

The Dutchman believes his two performances against Atletico and Villarreal are proof that he has now settled in at his new club.

"Now I feel perfect. I am very well. I know that I can improve, but I feel very well," he said. "It is natural that I want to improve in each game, but I try to fight to the best of my abilities and always help my teammates. In the last two games I have done much better."

Sneijder's first goal of the season was his 80th-minute winner against Atletico on the opening day, when Real bounced back from an early deficit to down their local rivals 2-1.

That instantly awarded Sneijder hero status among the Madridistas, but he went one better in the second round of action, scoring twice in Real's remarkable 5-0 win over a Villarreal side that had won their nine previous league games.

Sneijder played down his early-season success though. "I have had a lot of luck. It is very nice to score three goals in two games, it is fantastic, but what I have to do is score more in the following games and not remain on these three goals. ... We have had only two games and things are going well because we have obtained two victories and the fans are happy with our football.

"However, we need to be calm and continue working because this is only the start, although personally I cannot complain about how things are going. It is very soon in the season, but also it is good to be the leaders because it gives us confidence. Now it is important to

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Loew eyes Euro glory

AFP, Berlin

With his side five points clear at the top of their Euro 2008 qualifying group, Germany's head coach Joachim Loew revealed on Wednesday his plans for the assault on the European crown.

Germany face Wales, fifth in Group D, at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium on Saturday and should have their place at next June's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland confirmed by the end of the autumn.

With 275 days until Euro 2008 starts on June 7 2008, Loew already

has his side undergoing regular fitness tests and the hotels are reserved with five qualifying games still remaining.

The work ahead is mapped out for the players with a battery of physical tests planned, a broad review of manpower and a stay in the sun with their families scheduled before next summer's tournament.

"It is very important for the planning of our campaign in the coming months that we have precise data on the physical status of our players," explained Loew.

The head coach put 27 players, including the squad for Saturday's game, through a day of fitness tests in Cologne, something his predecessor Jurgen Klinsmann advo-

cated.

The new data will be compared with the data collected in 2004 and each player will be given a personalised training programme to follow.

But while Loew is using some of the managerial tricks inspired by Klinsmann (holidays with families, stringent fitness tests), Loew has also worked hard to heal the rift between Germany's top clubs and Klinsmann.

Loew called a meeting with the coaches of all the Bundesliga clubs, first and second division, to inform them of his plans for the Euro 2008 campaign ahead as well as commenting on the style of play he wants to see.

England plan aerial route

Football

AFP, London

England are planning to take the aerial route to victory over Israel in Saturday's must-win Euro 2008 qualifier at Wembley.

Steve McClaren sprung a surprise when he recalled powerful Wigan striker Emile Heskey to his squad after three years in the international wilderness.

It was a decision, England's head coach admits, that was strongly influenced by England's inability to break down the Israeli defence during a goalless draw in Tel Aviv earlier this year.

"There are only three ways you can get at teams - you can either go through them, go round them or go over them," McClaren said. "Emile gives us other options. He is a problem for defenders in the air and, in Israel, because Peter Crouch was not available, we did not have a Plan B.

"We have not got Peter for the Israel game this time either (because of suspension), which is one of the

reasons I have brought Emile in."

Heskey has been widely tipped to partner Michael Owen in attack, although McClaren has also been looking at how Owen combines with the more lightweight Andrew Johnson during England's training sessions.

In the absence of the injured Frank Lampard, McClaren is hoping Owen Hargreaves will be fit to partner Steven Gerrard in the centre of midfield for both the Israel match and the equally important meeting with Russia four days later.

That looks a tall order however for a player who has been struggling with tendonitis in his knee and has not played two matches in quick succession for Manchester United since moving to the Premier League champions in the summer.

As a result, McClaren has taken an extended look at Gareth Barry in a central midfield role and the Aston Villa captain's superior tackling appears to have moved him ahead of Manchester United's Michael Carrick in the midfield pecking order.

As well as deciding whether to

risk playing Gerrard, who will require a pain-killing injection in a broken toe, McClaren faces selection dilemmas on the right of midfield and in goal.

Paul Robinson's star has waned as a result of a string of high-profile errors and the Tottenham goalkeeper was at fault for Germany's equaliser in the 2-1 friendly defeat at Wembley last month.

That has opened the door for David James to resurrect an international career that appeared to be over when he lost his first-choice status to Robinson following an even more glaring blunder in a World Cup qualifier in Austria three years ago.

On the right of midfield, Shaun Wright-Phillips has been in impressive form this season but the Chelsea player has appeared overwhelmed on his previous England appearances and McClaren may prefer to ask David Bentley to fill that slot.

The Blackburn midfielder cannot match Wright-Phillips in terms of trickery but his crossing is arguably more astute, making him a closer fit for the gap left by the injured David Beckham.

Lacking English talent

AFP, London



A lack of over-priced talent and a flood of cheaper foreigners,

according to Blackburn chairman John Williams, are hurting the English game.

On the first weekend of the Premier League season, only 37 percent of players that started Premier League matches were English.

That was 81 players, a drop from 184, 15 years ago.

And Williams sees that as bad for the English game.

"There is a shortage of English talent and you have to pay premium prices for those out there," said Williams.

"I'm afraid that we have to shop

where the market is right, where the players are right and where the price is right.

"We want to support the England national team but the price of English players can be very off-putting."

West Ham chairman Eggert Magnusson however insists it is understandable that domestic talent costs more - but claims it still makes sense to buy British.

"You buy players who may have had a lot of success in the Dutch league or French league for example but doesn't mean they are going to be successful in the Premier League. There is a bit of a gamble to take," he said.

"You have to pay a little bit more for players who have a proven track record in the Premiership and that's fully understandable - and that goes whether you are talking about foreign players who have proved

themselves in the Premier League or English players."

Magnusson does think it is important for clubs to have a strong base of domestic talent however.

He added: "Sir Trevor (Brooking) can have no problem with West Ham because we want to have a strong England team and we believe it is important to support that and have English players at the club."

Meanwhile, Williams predicts wages will soar this year to reflect the record spending on transfers.

Sports consultants Deloitte believe there will not be such a dramatic rise in players' salaries compared to transfer fees, but Williams disagrees.

Deloitte's report shows transfer spending by English clubs this summer has exceeded 500 million pounds, smashing the previous summer's 300 million pounds.

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Beckham's mission impossible

Football

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham faces a near-impossible task to turn football into one of the USA's major sports, according to Sir Alex Ferguson.

The Manchester United manager feels his former Old Trafford protege cannot transform the fortunes of the sport by himself.

And he argued the sheer size of the USA and the exodus of young American talent to Europe would stunt the growth of Major League Soccer despite Beckham's best efforts.

Ferguson also claimed the former Real Madrid player's celebrity status had overshadowed his significance as a footballer.

Los Angeles Galaxy signed Beckham - currently out with a knee injury - on a five-year contract worth

up to £128million in a bid to boost the popularity of the game. But Ferguson feels the England midfielder will struggle to have a major impact on his own when the combined talents of Pele, Johan Cruyff and Franz Beckenbauer failed to have a lasting impact after playing for New York Cosmos three decades ago.

"In the late '70s I went to America with Aberdeen and there were guys like (Teofilo) Cubillas and (Peter) Shilton there," the Scot said.

"Before that there was Pele, Cruyff, Beckenbauer. It is difficult with David going there - I don't know what kind of impact he can make. David Beckham himself can't change the whole country."

And Ferguson feels the distance between teams affects the impact of football on American society.

"The size of the country makes it difficult," he said.

"In European football, and espe-

cially in British football, you can travel easily. If you are Boston and need to go to Los Angeles it's a six-hour flight. Supporters don't travel so you are missing that rivalry between fans.

"So you have a problem. To make it substantial you would have to go regional but there's not enough teams to have four strong leagues."

Ferguson, who was speaking to an audience at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, feels the MLS is also undermined by an exodus of young home grown talent.

"What you have got in the States is that a lot of kids are playing football in the States and there is nowhere to go," he said.

"The best American players go to Europe very early, like Brad Friedel (at Blackburn), (Brian) McBride and (Clint) Dempsey at Fulham. So that situation doesn't help the American game."

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PHOTO: AFP

French midfielder Franck Ribery (R) leads his teammates while jogging during a training session in Clairefontaine on Tuesday, four days before their Euro 2008 qualifying match against Italy in Milan.