



Brazil stars (from L-R) Lucio, Juan and Ronaldinho jog during a training exercise in Teresopolis, Rio de Janeiro on Tuesday.

England's attacking plan

Football

AFP, London

Steve McClaren has signalled his intention to ignore Newcastle's anxiety over Michael Owen and ask the injury-prone striker to lead England's attack against both Estonia and Russia.

Estonia should not present Wayne Rooney and co. with an overly taxing afternoon at Wembley on Saturday and McClaren has indicated that he is contemplating resting some of his first-choice XI. Defenders John Terry, Rio Ferdinand and Ashley Cole are all carrying bookings and would risk suspension for the more testing assignment in Russia next Wednesday if they were to collect another yellow card.

But McClaren's inclination to keep something in reserve for Moscow does not appear to apply to Owen, who had a tear in a stomach muscle surgically repaired on September 29.

The Newcastle striker, who is adamant himself that he is ready to play both matches as a result of the pioneering techniques used by his German surgeon, underlined his importance with three goals in the wins over Israel and Russia last month which put England's qualifying campaign back on track. "No risks will be taken, but Michael is a very, very important player for us," McClaren said. The head coach is keen to play down the extent of his differences with Sam Allardyce, the Newcastle manager who has made no secret of his fears that Owen could come back to him injured.

"There is no club v country issue, no conflict," McClaren insisted. "It is just dialogue between myself, the manager, the medics and the player. Ultimately we don't take risks with any player but anybody in my situation would want Michael playing," McClaren's other options in attack have been significantly reduced. A broken metatarsal has deprived him of the power of Emile Heskey, who dovetailed so effectively with Owen in last month's matches, and injuries have also forced Dean Ashton and Andrew Johnson out of his squad.

Peter Crouch meanwhile has hardly played for Liverpool this season and looked desperately short of confidence in last week's Champions League defeat by Marseille. All of which points to Owen starting alongside Rooney, who has

injured for the Russia and Israel matches, to ensure that England's first-choice strike pair reconnect before they run out on to the plastic pitch that awaits in Moscow.

A victory in the Russian capital could virtually seal England's place in next year's finals in Austria and Switzerland.

But McClaren has alerted his players to the dangers of allowing the importance of that fixture to distract them from the immediate task, a mistake that was made when a home clash with Macedonia at this time last year came four days before England were due to face Croatia in Zagreb.

"We have put ourselves in pole position but we have said to the players and the staff 'forget Russia'. We have got to concentrate on Estonia."

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Romania call up defender

AFP, Bucharest

Ajax defender George Ogara has been named in Romania's squad for their home Euro 2008 qualifier against Holland on Saturday at Constanta, the Romanian football federation said on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old international has not been picked for the Romanian squad for two and a half years.

Romania and Holland are in first and second place respectively of Group G both on 20 points after eight matches.

Kirch is back again

AFP, Berlin

Leo Kirch, the German media entrepreneur whose empire went bust five years ago, completed a remarkable comeback on Tuesday when it was announced he would market the domestic broadcast rights for German football starting in 2009.

Kirch's Sirius agency will sell the domestic broadcast rights for the Bundesliga, one of Europe's top leagues, for six seasons until 2015, the German Football League (DFL) said.

The DFL said it expected revenue of three billion euros (4.2 billion dollars).

The decision came as a surprise because Kirch held the Bundesliga broadcast rights in 2002 when the collapse of his debt-laden media empire led to dire financial consequences for German clubs. The company filed for insolvency later that year.

The DFL currently receives 440 million euros a season for the rights to broadcast live Bundesliga matches on the pay-TV channel Premiere with highlights on state-run television under a deal that ends after the 2008-2009 season.

The Bundesliga is trying to catch up with richer leagues such as the English Premier League, which is boosted by extensive receipts from foreign broadcasters, and Italy's Serie A.

Kirch, 80 and almost blind, has steered his way back into the media world after the spectacular collapse of 2002.

At its peak, Kirch Holding was valued at five billion dollars and owned Germany's only pay-TV channel, the rights to two football World Cups and a share of the license for Formula One motor racing.

Hiddink unlikely for Chelsea

Football

INTERNET, undated

Gus Hiddink insists it is 'very unlikely' he will manage Chelsea in the near future because club owner Roman Abramovich wants the Dutchman to concentrate on improving the fortunes of the Russian national team.

The Dutchman has been linked with the Blues job, especially since the departure of Jose Mourinho, but he insists he is looking to extend his contract as Russia coach - with Abramovich's blessing.

The billionaire reportedly contributes to Hiddink's national team

salary and the Dutch coach claims Abramovich wants him in place for the long term.

He told The Times: 'Since people continually associate me with Chelsea's owner, Roman Abramovich, I thought it would be a good idea to explain a little bit about our relationship.'

'I have met him five times: four times in London and once at the PSV (Eindhoven) training complex. As for all those stories about me being a candidate for the Chelsea job, we never discussed it.'

'I know that you can never say never in football, but that option would not have made sense.'

'We have a project to reshape Russian football by 2014, with the 2010 World Cup as the first phase.'

Given Abramovich's long-term commitment and vision, it seems very unlikely that he would try to disrupt that process.

Hiddink, whose Russia side face England in a vital Euro 2008 qualifier in Moscow next week, believes the Chelsea shake-up of recent weeks is part of Abramovich's desire to see his side play attractive football.

'At Chelsea, Abramovich has invested a lot of money in players and not so much in longer-term development,' he added.

'And you need to be able to show the world that with the players that they have, you can get results, but that you can also play attractive football. I think he felt that the latter was missing.'

Ian formally knighted

Cricket

AFP, London

English cricketing legend Ian Botham was formally made a knight of the realm by Queen Elizabeth II Wednesday, in a ceremony at her official Buckingham Palace residence in central London.

Botham, whose career has combined a rare talent on the cricket field with a flamboyant lifestyle off it, was rewarded for his services to sport and to charity in the Queen's Birthday Honours list in June.

"The monarchy stands for everything that makes me proud to be English. I'm a massive royalist," Botham said earlier this week, describing receiving the knighthood as "the greatest day of my life."

"I listen to all these republicans... If it was down to me I'd hang 'em! I honestly would. It's a traitor's game for me," he told the Guardian newspaper.

The 51-year-old, who chatted briefly with the monarch after she bestowed the medal on him, admitted that his family and friends have already had fun with his new title of "Sir."

Botham, who received an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) in 1992 and is now a cricket commentator and pundit, is married to Kath, mother to his three children.

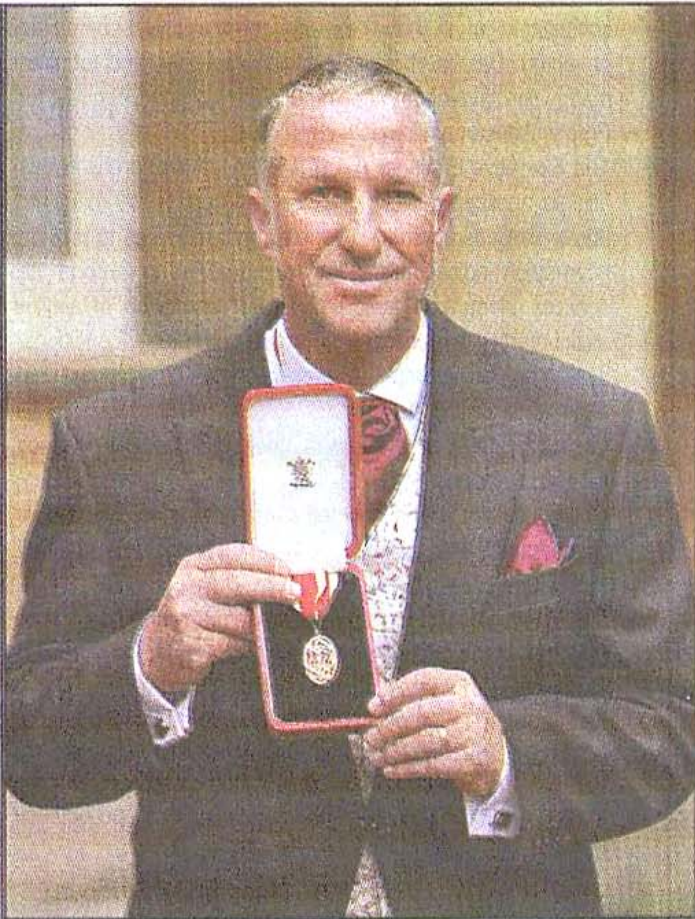


PHOTO: AFP

ARISE TO SIR BEEFY: England legend Sir Ian Botham displays the medal which he received after being knighted by the Queen at Buckingham Palace in London on Wednesday.

More woe for Borowski

AFP, Berlin

Germany midfielder Tim Borowski will miss Euro 2008 qualifying matches against Republic of Ireland and the Czech Republic, the German football federation said Tuesday.

The Bremen player, who missed the friendly against England on August 22, has back pain, the federation said.

Germany will also be without injured playmaker Michael Ballack and striker Miroslav Klose for the Ireland match on October 13 and the Czech match on October 17.

France lose Saha

AFP, Paris

Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson will breathe a sign of relief after his recovering striker Louis Saha Tuesday withdrew from the French squad for the Euro 2008 qualifying matches against Faroe Islands and Lithuania.

Saha arrived at the French training camp to verify his fitness but later withdrew after experiencing swelling of the knee, French team management said.

Saha returned last week after seven months out with knee and ankle injuries in Manchester United's 1-0 Champions League win over Roma.

However Ferguson on Friday promised to ease the star striker back into team and felt it was too early for international football.

"International football is not an issue for him at the moment. Although France have called him into the squad, it doesn't mean they are going to start him or anything like that," said Ferguson.

"The national team doctor was the one who gave him his last operation so he knows exactly what the situation is. And we would expect them to handle him in exactly the right way."

French coach Raymond Domenech has given himself until Tuesday evening to decide on whether to seek reinforcements to his 23-man squad.

Nakamura a Bhoj for life?

AFP, Tokyo

Scottish champions Celtic want to keep Japan star Shunsuke Nakamura "as long as possible" and will let him name the length of his next contract, a report said Wednesday.

Chief executive Peter Lawwell said Celtic wanted Nakamura, whose contract is up next June, to stay as long as possible, according to the Sports Hochi newspaper.

"He is a legend," the Japanese-language daily quoted Lawwell as saying.

"We hope Naka will play at Celtic as long as possible. A contract period? It's as long as he wants."

The newspaper has also said the Nissan Motor-owned Yokohama Marinos, where Nakamura started his career, is interested in re-signing the influential midfielder and will make him an offer in December.

Lawwell said Celtic will open talks with the Scottish Player of the Year soon.

"We want to believe he is enjoying his days at Celtic. We will soon have a talk with his agent," Lawwell said. No English transcript was available.

Nakamura, 29, left the Marinos for Italian side Reggina in 2002. He arrived at Celtic in 2005 after being voted most valuable player in Japan's victorious 2004 Asian Cup campaign.

Ireland pulls out

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City midfielder Stephen Ireland has pulled out of Ireland's squad for their Euro 2008 qualifiers against Germany and Cyprus, saying he did not feel mentally right to return to the squad.

Ireland, 21, pulled out of the Republic's last qualifier against the Czech Republic in September citing the death of a grandmother but later admitted he had made it up as he wanted to be with his partner who had suffered a miscarriage.

National team boss Steve Staunton has since forgiven the player for his error of judgement and recalled him to his squad.

But Ireland has decided not to accept the invitation. "I have thought long and hard about whether I would do my country and myself justice if I joined up with the squad," he said. "Unfortunately, I don't believe I would on this occasion."

City boss Sven-Goran Eriksson said he hoped the player would soon "feel stable enough" to resume his international career.

Sheva in Scots' way

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Andriy Shevchenko may no longer have the lethal predatory edge he displayed in his prime at AC Milan.

But Rangers defender David Weir insists that Chelsea's Ukrainian star remains a world class forward with the ability to wreck Scotland's dream of clinching a place at Euro 2008.

The Ukrainians will run out at Hampden on Saturday having taken just one point from their last three matches in group B, which Scotland currently top ahead of World Cup finalists Italy and France.

But Weir has warned his international team-mates that they cannot afford to underestimate a team spearheaded by Shevchenko and Liverpool's Andriy Voronin.

"They have two world-class stars and they have so much quality throughout their team," said the veteran defender, who is expected to win his 59th cap at Hampden on Saturday.

"We know it will be a tough game and we will have to be at our best if we are to get a win."

The Scots are unlikely to be complacent against the Ukrainians after being comprehensively outclassed in a 2-0 defeat in Kiev a year ago.

But the confidence and self-belief in Alex McLeish's squad has been steadily growing since that setback, culminating in the unexpected defeat of France in Paris last month that has given Scotland a great chance of reaching the finals of a major tournament for the first time since the 1998 World Cup.

"Ukraine are a top side, there is no doubt about that," Weir added. "But we played them away from home last time around so things will be slightly different when we play them at Hampden as I am sure the atmosphere will be unbelievable."

"Every international you are involved in is crucial but the significance of the ones coming up can't be underestimated because of our position in the group."

With only two points separating the top three sides in the group, Scotland have still got a lot of work to do with a testing trip to Georgia to come next week and their final game in the section being against Italy at home.

But they have the advantage of controlling their own destiny and there is no doubt that a victory on Saturday would pile the pressure on to the French, who slipped to third place in the group as a result of James McFadden's spectacular winner in Paris last month.

McLeish's preparation have

been hit by injuries. Manchester United's Darren Fletcher has not played since hobbling out of the match in Paris and Paul Hartley, the Celtic midfielder, has been forced to withdraw from the squad with a hamstring injury.

Celtic centre back Gary Caldwell, who could have stepped into the anchor role in midfield, is also missing.

The coach's options in attack have been increased however by Kenny Miller's return from injury and the bright start the former Celtic striker has made to his career at Derby. McLeish also underlined the threat posed by Shevchenko.

"I know he has maybe not been playing as well as he could in the Premier League but he is still a free spirit when he plays for Ukraine, I can tell you that," said the former Rangers boss.

"I believe they will think they have an outside chance if they win all their games which would mean them beating France in their last game."

"They have nothing to lose coming to Hampden and that can make them more dangerous. We have to look at the challenge with great confidence without being conceited. We have a good chance."

"We have beaten France twice so there is no reason that we can't beat Ukraine."

FIFA reveals shortlist

Football

AFP, Paris

The shortlist announced by FIFA for the 2007 World Player-of-the-Year awards:

MEN'S SHORTLIST

Italy (5): Gianluigi Buffon, Fabio Cannavaro, Gennaro Gattuso, Alessandro Nesta, Andrea Pirlo

France (4): Thierry Henry, Franck Ribery, Lilian Thuram, Patrick Vieira

England (4): Frank Lampard, Wayne Rooney, John Terry, Steven Gerrard

Argentina (3): Lionel Messi, Juan

Roman Riquelme, Carlos Tevez

Brazil (3): Juninho, Kaka, Ronaldinho

Germany (2): Miroslav Klose, Philipp Lahm

Portugal (2): Cristiano Ronaldo, Deco

Cameroon: Samuel Eto'o

Ivory Coast: Didier Drogba

Spain: Fernando Torres

Ghana: Michael Essien

Mexico: Rafael Marquez

Netherlands: Ruud van Nistelrooy

Czech Republic: Petr Cech

WOMEN'S SHORTLIST

Germany (5): Nadine Angerer, Ariane Hingst, Renate Lingor, Birgit Prinz, Kerstin Stegemann

Brazil (4): Cristiane, Daniela,

Formiga, Marta

Norway (4): Ragnhild Gulbrandsen, Bente Nordby, Anc Stangeland

Horpestad, Ingvild Stensland

Nigeria (2): Christie George, Perpetua Nkwocha

China (2): Duan Han, Jie Li

United States (2): Kristine Lilly, Abby Wambach

England: Kelly Smith

Australia: Lisa de Vanna

Canada: Christine Sinclair

Denmark: Cathrine Paaske Sorensen

Ghana: Adjoa Bayor

New Zealand: Rebecca Smyth

North Korea: Un Suk Ri

(The winners will be announced in Zurich on December 17)

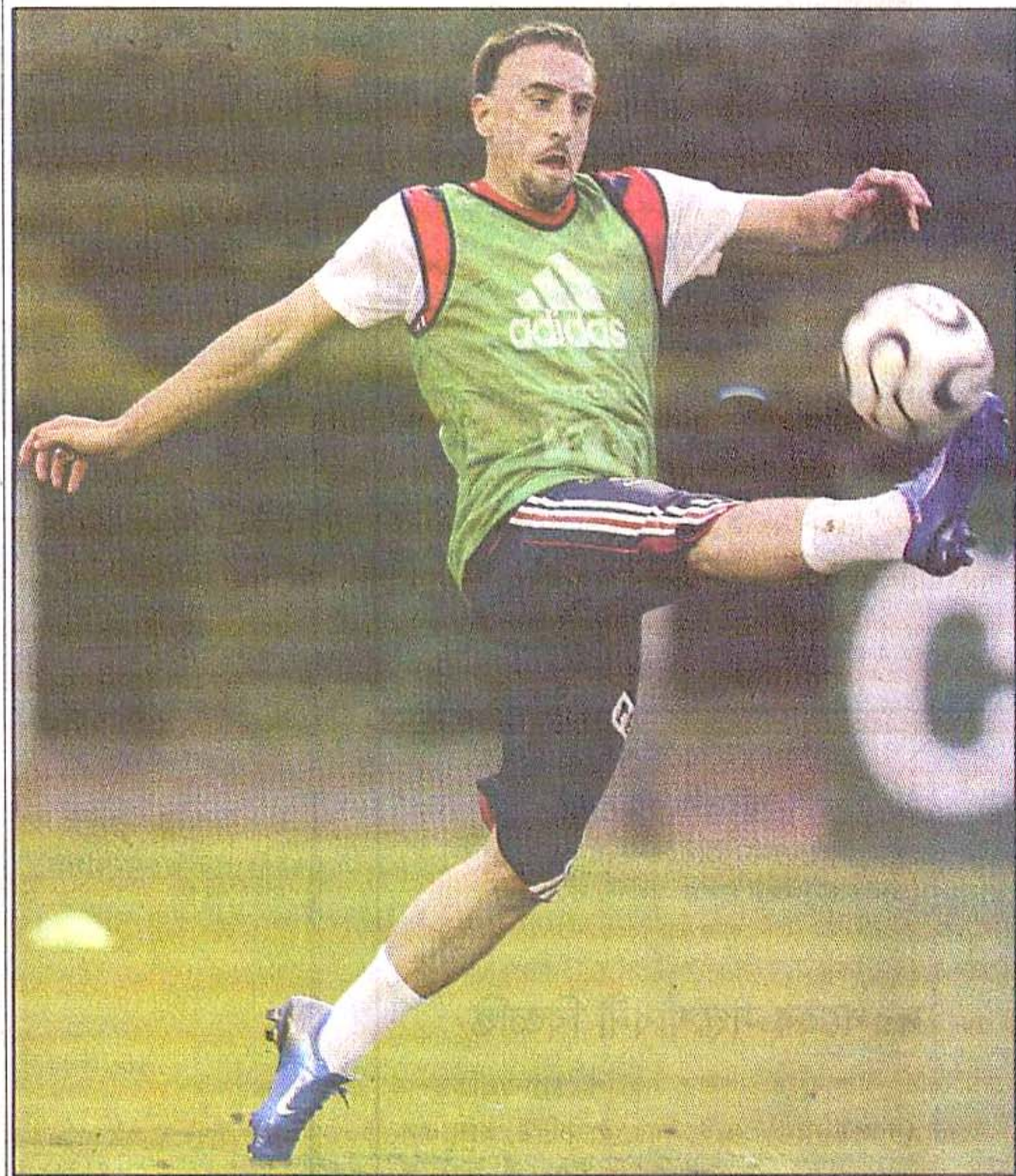


PHOTO: AFP

France winger Franck Ribery is at full-stretch to trap the ball during a training session in Clairefontaine on Tuesday.

Tough luck for Barry

Football

AFP, London

Gareth Barry was arguably England's best performer in the wins over Israel and Russia last month that put the country's Euro 2008 qualifying campaign back on track.

But the Aston Villa midfielder admitted on Wednesday that he had been given no guarantees about retaining his place alongside Steven Gerrard now that Chelsea's Frank Lampard is fit and back in the squad.

Players like Frank and Stevie are the reason you have to wait so

long for a chance to play for your country," Barry said.

"There are great players, especially in that central midfield role, and chances don't come around too often so when they do you have got to try and take them."

"There is competition everywhere, so it's nice to put my name in among the players you've been talking about."

Barry admits he would love another chance to impress against Estonia on Saturday after winning plaudits for the way he dovetailed with Gerrard last month.

"It's always great to be selected to play for your country," he said. To play the last two games was a bit of a surprise but it was nice to put in

two good performances and for people to talk about the way I played.

"The last two games were brilliant for me but it was the good 40 minutes I got in the Germany friendly in August that gave me the confidence and set me up for the qualifiers."

Thanks in no small part to Barry's tidy displays, England have put themselves in a strong position to qualify for Euro 2008, provided they beat Estonia and avoid defeat in Russia next week.

"You only have to look at the league table before the last two games, and it probably wasn't easy reading," Barry said. "But now it's all in our own hands."