



Members of the Dutch national team Ruud van Nistelrooy (L), Arjen Robben (C) and Wesley Sneijder (R) take part in a training session in Katwijk on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rooney ready to deliver

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney knows he owes England a match-winning performance and the striker is determined to finally deliver against Estonia on Saturday.

Rooney will have redemption on his mind as he makes his first England appearance for seven months in the Euro 2008 qualifier at Wembley.

After a dazzling start to his England career, Rooney admits he has found it hard to replicate the influential performances that made him such a star with Manchester United.

His last goal for his country came against the Netherlands in November 2006 and he hasn't scored in a competitive international for over three years.

Since netting twice against Croatia in Euro 2004, Rooney has endured a 16-match barren run which even he is at a loss to explain.

Fortunately confidence is a quality Rooney has never lacked and he remains certain the tide will turn against the Estonians.

"When I first started playing for England I did really well but in the last couple of years I haven't been as good as I can be," Rooney said.

"Obviously it's frustrating. Before every get-together I read and hear about the fact I haven't scored."

"My club form has been fine,

I've scored goals and there's been no problem. But when I've been away with England I haven't played as well as I can.

"In different games it just hasn't happened for me. I don't really know why that is. I want to try and put that right."

"I've got to play well to keep my place and there is more to come from me."

Rooney's failure to emulate his club form with England could go some way to explaining why his partnership with Michael Owen has often failed to gel.

Saturday will be the first time England's premier forwards have started together since a World Cup clash against Sweden last year when Owen suffered a serious knee injury.

On paper they look capable the perfect combination but the reality has been rather more prosaic.

In 17 starts, Rooney has scored seven times and Owen six. Not a terrible record, but hardly one to strike fear into defences either.

Playing with Emile Heskey, Owen averages a goal every 82 minutes, but with Rooney he only scores every 201 minutes.

If it hadn't been for Heskey's broken metatarsal, McClaren may even have opted to play Rooney on the left-wing to keep Owen alongside his favourite foil.

Rooney knows Heskey will be a genuine threat when he returns and he is determined to cement his place against Estonia and Russia.

"I'm expected to play well," he said. "I know if I want to play for my country I have to do that,

starting on Saturday.

"If Emile had been fit the manager would have had a difficult choice to make. But that just makes me more determined to get back playing well again."

"Having been out of the team so long, coming here this week it has felt like it's my first squad again."

It seems a lifetime since Rooney made his England debut in a blaze of publicity in 2003 as he became the country's youngest player and goalscorer.

Four years later Rooney is firmly established as one of the great talents of his generation, but he still hasn't got used to the attention his position attracts.

While some of his England peers relish their time in the limelight, Rooney recoils from the harsh glare of celebrity culture.

"I don't really enjoy the spotlight all the time," he said. "Any-one who knows me off the field knows I hate it really."

"It's probably calmed down a little and I'm getting older and feel I'm maturing a lot."

"I'm a quiet family man. When I finish training most days I go home and sit in watching television. 'I'm a bit of a boring person!'"

"I tend to go down to my auntie and uncle's a lot and be round my family."

"I've just started playing golf as well. I've played a couple of rounds but I'm not the best."

You wouldn't bet against Rooney winning his battle to master the fairways and his England form probably won't be much of a problem either.

Frings to captain Germany

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen midfielder Torsten Frings will captain Germany against Ireland on Saturday as his team look to guarantee their place in next summer's Euro 2008 tournament.

Frings only returned from a pre-season knee injury ten days ago, but will wear the captain's armband in Dublin with a win set to guarantee Germany their place at the Austria and Switzerland tournament next summer.

The 30-year-old will win his 69th cap at Croke Park on Saturday with German coach Joachim Loew urging his team to push for three points to make sure of their place at the Euro 2008 party.

With the experienced trio of captain Michael Ballack, midfielder Bernd Schneider and striker Miroslav Klose out with injuries, Frings will lead the side.

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'Scotland, Italy will stumble'

AFP, Clairefontaine

France defender William Gallas thinks Scotland and Italy will stumble on their way through the remaining Euro 2008 qualifying matches.

"Scotland will weaken (in the final matches) and Italy too," the Arsenal captain said on Thursday.

"We will go right to the end, everything depends on us and Scotland. Between now and the end (of qualification) Scotland will stumble which will help us a little," he said.

Gallas returns after being sidelined with a groin injury since August 19 and missing France's last three games, including their 1-0 loss to Scotland which leaves them facing a worrying time to see if they make the finals.

In the Group B qualifying group, Scotland is on top with 21 points, Italy second with 20 points and France third with 19 points.

To be sure of qualifying, France must win the last three matches against the Faroe Islands, Lithuania and Ukraine.

Richards pledges City stay

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City fans were given fresh cause for celebration on Wednesday when the club's brightest young star, Micah Richards, revealed that he was on the verge of signing a new contract.

The England defender has been a key figure in City's strong start to their first season under new boss Sven-Goran Eriksson and would be a target for most of Europe's top clubs if there was any hint that he could be available.

But the 19-year-old insists he is happy where he is and has taken a swipe at the spin that this week put on an old interview in which he expressed the ambition of playing for Arsenal.

"I'm just about to sign a new Manchester City contract and last week I said I hope I'll be captain one day," Richards said. "I'm in final talks and hope we'll have something signed very, very soon it's just down to the finer details."

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Xabi ban reduced

INTERNET, undated



Liverpool's Xabi Alonso is available for Spain's Euro 2008 qualifier at home to Sweden on November 17.

UEFA reduced a three-match suspension for his sending-off against Iceland to two games following an appeal by the Spanish Football Federation.

The midfielder fractured a bone in his foot while playing for Liverpool last month but is expected to be fit again by the start of next month.

Centre-back Carles Puyol and midfielder David Silva could start on the bench for Saturday's game in Denmark because of minor injury niggles.

Defender Puyol has only recently returned from a knee injury and suffered a minor calf strain in Barcelona's 2-0 Champions League win at VfB Stuttgart last week, although he did play in the Primera Liga at the weekend.

Silva has been suffering from muscular pain after featuring in every league game for Valencia.

Romania captain Cristian Chivu is willing to risk aggravating a shoulder injury to play against the Netherlands in Saturday's key Euro 2008 qualifier.

Romania, leading Group G from the Dutch on goal difference, are bidding to reach their first major tournament since 2000 but have six first-team players struggling with injuries.

Chivu injured his shoulder in Romania's recent 3-1 friendly

defeat by Germany and doctors had warned the Inter defender that he needed six weeks to recover fully.

"I took full responsibility for returning sooner with my shoulder only partially mended, as both Inter and the national team need me," he said.

"It will be the match of our whole generation -- a generation who have not yet breathed the air of a big tournament."

Croatia coach Slaven Bilic is confident Croatia will beat Israel on Saturday despite their injury problems.

The Balkan nation are without strikers Igor Budan, Bosko Balaban and Mladen Petric as well as captain Niko Kovac, while wing-back Dario Srna is doubtful with a hamstring problem.

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Kahn hits back at Lehmann

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich captain and former German goalkeeper Oliver Kahn hit back on Thursday at criticism by Germany's current shot-stopper Jens Lehmann.

Arsenal goalkeeper Lehmann took a swipe at Kahn, who he replaced as national keeper at last year's World Cup, when he told German magazine Der Spiegel last week that Kahn "takes himself far too seriously and thinks he is very important."

But Kahn, back in Germany after surgery in the United States for a painful elbow injury, replied by saying Lehmann should be grateful he is in the national side as he is currently warming the bench at the north London club.

"Perhaps rather than talk about former colleagues, he should be grateful he has the chance to play in the national team while he doesn't play for his club," Kahn told football magazine Kicker.

"That has never happened before in the history of German football."

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Terry to have knee scan

AFP, London

England could lose influential captain John Terry for next week's crucial Euro 2008 qualifier in Russia after the Chelsea defender was sent for a scan on a sore knee.

Already suffering from fractures of his cheekbone and a toe, Terry felt pain in the knee during training and was sent to see a specialist whose diagnosis was expected to be announced later on Thursday.

Terry had been expected to sit out Saturday's match against Estonia in any case as he is carrying a booking and would be running the risk of being suspended for the much tougher assignment in Moscow.

If Terry is not fit, Sol Campbell will be expected to start both matches alongside Rio Ferdinand, re-establishing what was England's first-choice centreback pairing until Campbell lost his place in the side two years ago.

Match-fixers sent to jail

AFP, Prague

A Czech court handed out stiffer penalties on Thursday to three football club officials and seven referees found guilty of involvement in a major corruption scandal by imposing conditional jail sentences of from three to 10 months on them.

The court in the south-eastern town of Kromeriz, imposed conditional jail sentences on the officials from the FC Synot football club, now FC Slovan, and referees.

The 10 had appealed earlier sentences delivered by the court in January 2006 which included fines of between 50,000-300,000 koruna (1,820-10,920 euros, 2,575-15,450 dollars).

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Lampard for sale?

AFP, Madrid

Chelsea's England star Frank Lampard is up for sale, a Spanish newspaper said Thursday, quoting sources in the London club and close to the midfielder.

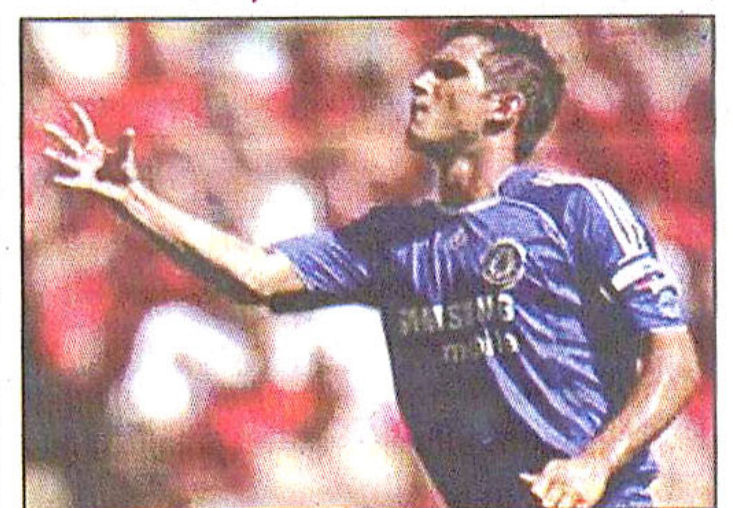
Lampard would cost around 18 million euros (25.5 million dollars, 12.5 million pounds), the AS sports newspaper said.

Three clubs are already in contact with the player's agent, Steve Kutner: Juventus, AC Milan and "a few days ago with a representative to Real Madrid," it said.

Lampard, who has scored 13 goals in 56 England appearances, has won two Premier League championships with Chelsea, in 2005 and 2006. He joined the west London club in 2001 from West Ham.

The midfielder had been an integral part of the Chelsea setup during Jose Mourinho's reign at Stamford Bridge, but the

Portuguese manager's recent departure has cast doubts over the future of several players as a new team of coaches comes in.



FRANK LAMPARD

Ten Cate Blues' in 24 hrs

AFP, Amsterdam

Former Ajax coach Henk ten Cate will be named to Chelsea's coaching staff in the next 24 hours, the Premiership club's website said on Wednesday.

Ten Cate will join Chelsea manager Avram Grant's coaching staff as the Blues look to rebuild following the departure of former boss Jose Mourinho.

According to the club's website, ten Cate is set to be unveiled as assistant first-team coach at Stamford Bridge.

The 52-year-old Dutchman, who previously worked under compatriot Frank Rijkaard at

Barcelona, quit as Ajax boss on Monday.

Avram's assistant Steve Clarke and ten Cate will be the two men responsible for first-team affairs under Avram at the Premier League club.

A statement on Chelsea's official website read: "Chelsea have reached agreement with Ajax for the release of Henk ten Cate. We expect to finalise his contract with Chelsea in the next 24 hours as assistant first-team coach."

Meanwhile Chelsea's injured midfielder Michael Ballack has given coach Grant a major boost by confirming he has no intention of quitting the club.

The former Bayern Munich midfielder, struggling to regain full fitness following two ankle operations, wants to remain at Stamford

Bridge for the rest of his career.

The Germany international struggled to make an impact under former coach Jose Mourinho and was linked with a summer switch to Real Madrid.

Ballack has two years remaining on his contract and even though Grant has replaced Mourinho and ten Cate is set to arrive imminently, the German wants to remain part of the new set-up.

Ballack, 31, told German TV station ARD: "I feel very happy here and would like to end my career at Chelsea. Although I want to end my career at Chelsea, if I am still fit when my contract runs out, why should I not play on for another two years?"

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Adebayor, Kanoute to face off

AFP, Johannesburg

Crack strikers Emmanuel Adebayor of Togo and Frederic Kanoute of Mali come face to face Friday in the battle for a 2008 African Nations Cup place.

The West African countries clash in a winner-takes-all Group 9 showdown in Lome postponed from last month due to presidential elections in Sierra Leone, another of the four mini-league teams.

Sierra Leone host Benin at the same time in Freetown in an equally crucial match as the pool reaches a thrilling climax with two nations capable of qualifying for the biennial tournament in Ghana next January and February.

A victory for Togo or Mali and they advance as group winners while Benin can sneak through as one of the best three runners-up provided they collect maximum points.

But the permutations are endless and one that will haunt Togo and Mali is that they draw and Benin win, which would eliminate the Lome combatants, give Benin top spot, and idle Uganda would fill the last runners-up slot.

Benin must win to make it and should they fail and the other match is drawn, Mali will top the table thanks to a better head-to-head record having defeated Togo 1-0 at home.

Adebayor, hat-trick hero when Arsenal demolished Derby 5-0 two weeks ago, has much to prove with many Togo supporters blaming his absence for a 4-1 away drubbing by Benin last June.

The striker has been involved in numerous rows with officials over alleged unpaid bonuses from the 2006 World Cup where Togo threatened to boycott a pool fixture against France.

Cup organisers FIFA paid the players directly to solve a dispute that proved hugely embarrassing

for African football and led Togo coach Otto Pfister to briefly resign during the tournament.

Mali coach Jean-Francois Jodar has warned his players not to fear Adebayor, whose exploits for the London Gunners are seen by millions around Africa every weekend.

"We must not fear Adebayor because if he makes us tremble then what is going to happen if we face the likes of (Didier) Drogba, (Samuel) Eto'o and others in Ghana," warned the Frenchman.

Kanoute of UEFA Cup and Spanish Cup title holders Sevilla has no financial complaints, just a scarcity of goals with only one for the Malian Eagles during the last year, and that via the penalty spot.

While Togo coach Stephen Keshi must rely heavily on Adebayor in a squad with no other household name, Jodar can also call on midfielders Mahamadou Diarra of Real Madrid, Seydou Keita of Sevilla and Mohamed Sissoko of Liverpool.

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England opener Alastair Cook works the ball towards mid-wicket during the fourth one-day international against Sri Lanka at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP