

Romanian players (from L to R) Bogdan Lobont, Adrian Mutu and Cosmin Contra jog together with teammates during their training session at Mogosoaia Centre in Bucharest on Thursday.

Steaua boss promises big bonus

AFP, Bucharest

Steaua Bucharest owner Gigi Becali has promised a 5.5-million-euro bonus for the Romanian squad should they win Euro 2008.

"I'm going to offer the national team 500,000 euros if they get through the pool stages, two million if they qualify for the final and three million if they win it," Becali told a press conference on Friday.

Romania have been drawn in arguably the toughest group of the June 7-29 tournament against reigning world champions Italy, 2006 World Cup finalists France, and the Netherlands.

Becali, who is being investigated in two different footballrelated corruption cases, added: "I hope the public prosecutor's office won't open a new file on me because, for certain prosecutors, to give footballers money is synonymous with corruption.'

Messi prefers **Olympics**

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's star striker Lionel Messi said on Thursday he had decided to play in August's Beijing Olympics with Argentina's under-23 side, meaning he will miss Barcelona's Champions League third qualifying round. Barca, who finished third in the Spanish league following last weekend's final round of matches, must win the two-leg tie to enter the money-spinning group stage of the world's most high-profile club competition.

"It's up to me to decide and I will never have the chance to play in the Olympics again," said 20-year-old Messi at a press conference in Barcelona, saying he had not yet spoken with his club.

Harry wins legal battle

AFP, London

Portsmouth boss Harry Redknapp has won his legal battle over a police raid on his home that may have scuppered his hopes of becoming the manager of England.

England's High Court ruled on Friday that the officers who carried out the raid as part of a probe into alleged corruption in English football acted illegally.

The judge in the case concluded that the search warrant used by City of London Police for the November search was invalid and described procedural failures in the application for it as "wholly

unacceptable." Redknapp was awarded 1,000

pounds damages and the police were ordered to pay part of his legal costs. Redknapp has repeatedly

denied any involvement in suspect transfer dealings, which are the subject of the City of London force's long-running investigation.

He believes that the raid, which was caught on film by tabloid photographers who had been tipped off about it, and his subsequent arrest seriously tarnished his reputation and effectively ended his chances of succeeding Steve

McClaren in the England job. Prior to the raid, Redknapp had been regarded as the leading homegrown candidate for the post and the Football Association had been keen to appoint an Englishman. The governing body subsequently gave the job to Italian Fabio Capello.

Romania look to upset

AFP, Bucharest



On paper Romania look to be the punch bag of Euro 2008's Group of Death but it would be foolish to discount them from turning the tables on their rivals.

trophies of reigning world champions Italy or of 2006 World Cup finalists France, who have two European titles and the 1998 World Cup to their tally, or indeed the pedigree of The Netherlands.

But they topped their qualifying group ahead of the Dutch, drawing with them and then winning the return 1-0.

In the rather sombre coach Victor

Piturca they have as astute and tactically sound handler as anyone would wish to have and he will have the resounding support of his players.

The squad will be seeking to prove that the likes of outstanding central defender Christian Chivu and striker Adrian Mutu can more than outdo their glamorous predecessors like Gheorghe Popescu, Gheorghe Hagi or Florian Radicioiu who helped Romania to the 1994 World Cup The Romanians do not boast the quarter-finals.

The coach is known for his plain speaking.

It cost him the national coaching post the first time round when he told Popescu and Hagi that even if they had qualified for Euro 2000 they were not guaranteed places in the squad let alone the first team. He has not relented from that

strategy in his second spell having

told Mutu that he would be dropped if he thought he was not on form, but he remains fiercely loyal in the large part to his squad. "I will mainly pick players who

helped us qualify for the finals. There cannot be any surprises," Piturca, known as 'Piti, was quoted on the UEFA website as saying.

Players such as Chivu, Mutu and Cosmin Contra owe their initial international blooding down to Piturca's first spell in charge but the coach was not been afraid to hand younger players their debuts during the qualifying process.

For Chivu, who has starred in Inter Milan's Serie A title chase this season, there is all to play for.

"We will fight for glory, respect and for the fans. Our national team is about glory," the 27-year-old told

Top coaches' big gamble

AFP, Paris



Being second Cup on the international should bring EURO2008 together the cream of the

continental crop -- which is doubtless why under-achieving England must watch at home.

Yet the coaches of several top sides have approached the event in Austria and Switzerland as if swaggering to the gamblers' table at the casino, given that they have elected to leave out some of their ostensibly most gifted performers.

So will the gambles of France coach Raymond Domenech, Italian counterpart Roberto Donadoni and Spain's Luis Aragones pay off?

with their decisions to drop, respectively, David Trezeguet, Filippo Inzaghi and Raul, authors of 103 international goals between them and Donadoni may yet elect to trim Serie A top scorer Alessandro Del Piero, who has netted 27 times for the Azzurri.

At 33, Del Piero is keeping his the squadeither." fingers crossed he does not become a fourth major absentee as he seeks to star in what is likely to be his last international tournament.

Most observers believe Montolivo -- just a sole cap to date --

place by the May 28 deadline.

Domenech, Donadoni and Aragones clearly know their own mind - yet a comparison of the illustrious missing with a roll-call of their replacements formants sentiments in their homelands ranging from curiosity to blank incomprehension. The case of Spanish all-time top

scorer Raul appears extraordinary to Madrid media which largely worship his club Real.

Rather perversely, within days of learning Aragones had extended the exile of the 30-year-old striker to two years Raul was voted Spanish player of the year after his 18 league goals helped propel Real to another league championship.

That meant nothing to Aragones, the man nicknamed the "Wise Man of Hortaleza," preferring uncapped Real Zaragoza striker Sergio Garcia, who scored just four times in a All three have raised eyebrows season which saw his team rele-

Aragones' explanation? "I focus on the players, not the position of the team in the league. There are many other players who, when you look at the number of minutes played, have scored more than Raul and they haven't made

With Fernando Torres and David Villa as his spearheads, perhaps this Spanish sage feels he can afford to take the risk.

In spinning their squad wheels to dump Trezeguet and Inzaghi, Domenech and Donadoni likewise insist the World Cup finalists have other aces up their sleeves, such as

He said: "It's a great feeling. We

Thierry Henry, Nicolas Anelka and Karim Benzema for the French, and Bayern Munich hitman Luca Toni for the Italians.

Yet the Inzaghi decision still bemuses, given Donadoni's decision to prefer Genoa's Marco Borriello, just two caps, the petulant Antonio Cassano of Sampdoria (10 caps), and Udinese's Fabio Quagliarella, who has made only eight appearances.

"For 'Pippo' (Inzaghi), age didn't come into it. It was a technical choice," Donadoni said.

Meanwhile, Domenech clearly has an issue with Trezeguet, 1998 world champion and golden goal hero at Italian expense in the final of Euro 2000, given that he could not accommodate a man so consistently prolific in Serie A who knows France's group rivals so well.

Instead, the coach has defended his choice of untried St Etienne forward Bafetimbi Gomis.

"It's an organisational issue, to do with the game plan. David has said that himself. You have to make a choice," he told reporters, adding that Trezeguet's exploits at Juve "are no longer my problem."

But Juve coach Claudio Ranieri professed to being "amazed" by the non-selection of his "predator."

"I can't understand it -- he's a tremendous goalscorer," said the former Chelsea boss.

Another absentee is Dutch veteran midfielder Clarence Seedorf, who claimed coach and 1988 European champion champion Marco van Basten had no confidence in him.

Rangers' misery was confounded

Scottish Cup final on Saturday against Queen of the South -- with Rangers hoping to complete a

Rangers manager Walter Smith was understandably disappointed to have missed out on the league title.

He said: "Despite all the talk about goal difference before the game we knew how hard it would be. Aberdeen always lift their game against Rangers and we were just aiming to win.

"All season we've struggled to handle our games after the big European games and that has been a big factor.

"Nacho was just a bit to excited and we could have done without the sending-offahead of the cup final."

Kaka to have operation

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's Brazilian playmaker Kaka, the 2007 FIFA World Player of the Year, will have an operation on his right knee on Friday, the Italian first division club said.

The length of recovery needed for 25-year-old Kaka, who recently signed a new deal with the Italian giants which will see him stay at the club until 2013, will be known after the operation.

AC Milan, who have told Brazil that they will not release star midfielder Kaka to take part in the Beijing Olympics football tournament in August, have had to do without him for much of the past year because of a recurring knee problem.

Henry thought about quitting after Euro

AFP, Paris

France striker Thierry Henry for. admitted Friday he has had thoughts about quitting after next month's Euro 2008.

"There's nothing further to add. All I said was that the question had passed through my head, full stop," Henry, France's all-time leading goalscorer with 44, told reporters at the French training camp at Clairefontaine.

In an interview with L'Equipe newspaper on Friday, the Barcelona hitman and France's alltime record goal-scorer said he had "thought about saying goodbye after the Euro"

"I've thought a lot about it. Do you think I'm not going to say that I'm thinking about it? I'm 31-and-a-half years old and I'm playing up front."

Villarreal snap up Edmilson

AFP, Madrid

Spanish league runners-up Villarreal have signed up Brazilian World Cup winner Edmilson, whose contract with Barcelona was at an end.

The 31-year-old centre-back, who can also play as a holding midfielder, spent four seasons at Barcelona during which he won La Liga twice and picked up a Champions League winners'

Edmilson, who previously played for Lyon, with whom he won three French league titles, has played 40 times for Brazil and was part of the 2002 World Cupwinning squad.

Owen out for England

AFP, London

Michael Owen is set to miss England's upcoming friendlies against the United States and Trinidad and Tobago.

The Newcastle striker was unable to join up with Fabio Capello's squad on Friday after going down with a virus and will miss Wednesday's match against the United States at Wembley as well as the trip to Trinidad for the second match, on Sunday, June 1. Tottenham midfielder Jermaine

Jenas will also miss the matches, because of an ankle injury.

Players from Chelsea and Manchester United, who played in the Champions League final in Moscow on Wednesday, were not due to report until Saturday while David Beckham was due to join the squad Sunday after playing for his MLS club, Los Angeles Galaxy, against Kansas City on Saturday.

Owen's absence could give Arsenal youngster Theo Walcott, West Ham's Dean Ashton, Aston. Villa's Gabriel Agbonlahor and Portsmouth's Jermain Defoe a chance to catch the eye of head coach Fabio Capello.

The Italian, who has yet to give Owen an England start, also has Liverpool's Peter Crouch and Wayne Rooney at his disposal.

The two upcoming matches will enable Capello to fine tune his preparations for England's qualifying campaign for the 2010 World Cup, which begins with an away fixture against Andorra on September 6. Prior to that, England will play a

friendly against the Czech Republic at Wembley on August 20, by which night's heroics. time Capello will have decided on a captain for the bid to reach the 2010 finals in South Africa. national team. Steven Gerrard captained the

side for Capello's first match in of death.

> Loew has granted Ballack some time out with the Chelsea midfielder joining up with the rest of the Mannschaft on hisrighthand.

Mancini's last match?

Football

AFP, Rome

Roberto Mancini will take charge of Inter Milan in Saturday's Italian Cup final against AS Roma at Rome's Stadio Olimpico, possibly for the last time.

INTER V ROMA

Rumours have been circulating for some time that Mancini will quit Inter at the end of the season -supposedly to be replaced by former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho.

And the coach's failure to speak to the press following last weekend's title success only served to intensify the speculation.

Mancini, it seems, simply

wanted to avoid any questions surrounding his future until he clarifies it -- which could happen after the cup final. Inter have been claiming that he

will certainly stay but there would be no other sensible statement to make with a cup final to prepare And Inter president Massimo Moratti certainly didn't douse

the question of his coach's future. "Mancini and I saw each other at training but only to celebrate," said Moratti.

those flames when he tried to avoid

"We drank a toast and celebrated the title and I believe that

this title has an important place in them. our history.

"In this victory there was everything that Inter represents: drama, intensity and the isolation that in the end made us feel like heroes."

about potential acquisitions .-complimenting Frank Lampard on his Champions League final performance -- rather than the future of his coach, who claimed after Inter's Champions League second round exit to Liverpool that he would leave at the season's end.

more a case of not upsetting the applecart rather than his genuine desire to stay. If this is to be Mancini's last game in charge, it will be an intrigu-

day later but that seemed to be

ing way to bow out. Only a week after the end of injured. their thrilling title chase, in which Inter claimed a third straight Serie A crown, the two best teams in Italy will once again lock horns for the right to hoist a piece of silverware.

It will be the fourth time in a row that the two meet in the final.

The champions will obviously start as favourites for several reasons. They won the title, got the better of Roma in head-toheads this season and of the last

There is something a little different about this one, though, as for the first time since 1980 it is being played in a one-off match. For anyone who believes in omens: Moratti was more keen to talk Roma won that time in the Stadio Olimpico.

They can count on home advantage again this season but during their league campaign they suffered a 4-1 defeat to Inter on this ground.

However, in last season's twolegged cup final, it was their performance in Rome that won them the He retracted that statement a cup. A 6-2 victory rendered the second leg in Milan almost meaningless and Inter's 2-1 win fell a long way short of what they

Missing players could play a vital role as Roma will still be without captain Francesco Totti, who is

However, Inter have many injury problems themselves, particularly in defence where firstchoice centre-back pairing Walter Samuel and Ivan Cordoba are injured and now Marco Materazzi is suspended as well.

Argentine forward Julio Cruz is also suspended but his loss will be offset by the return to the starting line-up of Zlatana Ibrahimovic, probably Inter's best player this three cup finals, they won two of season.

Ferguson slams Real

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has launched a stinging attack on Real Madrid, accusing the Spanish champions of 'lacking morals' in their attempts to lure Cristiano Ronaldo to the Bernabeu.

The Manchester United manager is furious at statements made by Real coach Bernd Schuster and president Ramon Calderon questioning whether Ronaldo really with great moral issues like wants to stay at Old Trafford. Speculation surrounding the

Portugese winger has intensified despite United's thrilling Champions League final victory over Chelsea this week. But Ferguson responded by insisting Ronaldo is going

nowhere, and angrily accused Schuster and Calderon of deliberately attempting to unsettle his

this market as a vehicle to unsettle players. with us and has four years left on

night that Calderon's talking,

Schuster's talking, and they use

thing. And Calderon makes that great statement 'slavery was abolished many, many years ago'. Did he tell Franco that? Jesus Christ, give me a break.

"It doesn't matter which player it is, the ones you want to keep you have work hard at to keep. In the modern day that's a fact. So that's not lost on Manchester United. And it's not lost on Real Madrid either. They have to try and keep their best players and we have to try and keep ours." "In terms of great clubs, clubs

Barcelona have far better moral issues than Real Madrid will ever not the only club with an inter-

"Do you not think we've not had many interests from the big clubs in Europe about our best players? Of course. But they don't get into the nonsense that they "You get used to Real Madrid's (Real Madrid) get into. And

they won't do it with us." David Beckham and Ruud van his contract and that's the first Nistelrooy both moving to the onships."

Spanish capital. Ferguson, though, insists those

expensive moves were brokered simply because, unlike in the case of Ronaldo, it was the United manager who decided the two players were surplus to requirements at Old Trafford, and not the result of pressure from Real.

"We sold them Van Nistelrooy and Beckham because we wanted to," he added. "I won't be moving anyone out in the summer. They're all staying." The United manager admitted

he was already planning for next season less than 48 hours after lifting the European Cup for the second time - the club's third vic-"We know Real Madrid are tory in the competition - and restated his belief that his current squad can repeat this season's triumph of a league and

Champions League double. He said: "I will now look at the squad and see what we need for

"This team will win more titles, I'm sure of that, and the challenge performance in these things," said they've no moral issues at all. to win more European trophies is the United manager. "I read last They think that they can ride something has been part of our roughshod over everyone but motivation every year.

"Real Madrid, AC Milan, United have twice sold high Liverpool are on five, then Bayern profile players to the La Liga and Ajax. And I think that's the big "The simple facts are that he is champions in recent years with challenge, to get to a more respectable number of European champi-



A nervy two week countdown starts on Saturday as the 16 Euro 2008 finalists put the finishing touches to their squads

between co-hosts Switzerland and the Czech Republic in Basel.

League and Euro treble. While for beaten Champions League finalist Chelsea's Claude Makelele, Ricardo Carvalho,

Domenech will be relieved to attack hear that full-back Evra resisted the temptation to join the rest of his celebrating United colleagues in painting Moscow's Red Square even redder after Wednesday

"I didn't really party a lot after knee and thigh injuries. because I need to go with the

"I don't drink alcohol anyway," said the French defender whose job will be to stop the attacks of France's Group C rivals' Italy, The Netherlands and Romania in what has been classed the mother of all groups bay.

manager paying visits to the sick

est in Ronaldo but they are not

A nervy two weeks wait

AFP, Paris



cold war has well and truly started with Dutch coach Marco van Basten trying to put the heat

ahead of the opening game

The June 7-29 European footballing extravaganza offers Manchester United quintet Patrice Evra, Edwin van der Sar, Cristiano Ronaldo, Nani and Mikael Silvestre a shot at a unique Premier League-Champions

Michael Ballack, Florent Malouda, Nicolas Anelka and Petr Cech the tournament represents a chance of wiping away the tears of that drama-laden penalty shoot-out defeat.

Germany have a friendly against Belarus on Tuesday. It may be 14 days until the first football is kicked in anger but the

on two of the pre-tournament favourites -- Italy and France. Van Basten, whose side have an opening match baptism of fire against World Cup winners Italy in Berne on June 9, said: "France (beaten World Cup finalists) and

Italy are undoubtedly even stron-

ger than in 2006.

groups of players which haven't changed much and so are therefore even more experienced. "France have really impressed

me in terms of the level of their

"These two sides feature two

physical potential. "They're really powerful." Turning to the Azzurri the man who will forever be associated with the wonder goal that helped Holland to the 1988 title said:

"Italy are no more the team to

play with their backs to the wall France manager Raymond before scoring on the counter "Nowadays they've got the

conquering spirit.

player," said the coach.

Van Basten has his fair share of injury worries with Arsenal striker Robin van Persie training apart from the rest of the squad

"Robin is a very special

even if he is a doubt for the Italy game. We do not want to take risks with van Persie.' Van Basten is not the only Euro

Switzerland's preparations for Germany manager Joachim instance have been hit by the news that defender Steve von Bergen will miss the entire competition after breaking a bone in

member of Jakob 'Kobi' Kuhn's side to limp out after goalkeeper Fabio Coltorti was sent home suffering from post-viral fatigue and striker Blaise Kufo was diagnosed with a torn groin muscle.

Over with Italy AC Milan's

World Cup winning right-back

Massimo Oddo expressed "bitterness and disappointment" after being left out of Roberto Donadoni's provisional squad. Donadoni blamed knee surgery the player underwent three

weeks ago but Oddo claimed that was just an excuse. "After putting my own interests aside, and putting in so much effort during two years of hard work together with my teammates, which led to our qualifica-

tion, it ends with this exclusion. "It burns me up inside because I honestly did not expect it."

Oddo is not the only Italian player to have taken exception to Donadoni's selection policy as his veteran AC Milan team-mate Filippo Inzaghi has called on the manager to give him an explanation for his absence from the provisional 24-man squad.

Turkey and 2004 runners-up Portugal will be the first teams to arrive for the championships on Shock 2004 winners Greece have issued a bullish statement of

intent insisting their win four years ago was no fluke. "We will be taking him with us "Our philosophy is the same as in 2004. We are a team that has gained the respect of Europe," said striker Angelos Charisteas,

the final against Portugal.

"Europe has a big question as to if we will have the same luck as in 2004 in Portugal. We will show Europe with our progress. I hope to be able to score many goals, but without the help of my team-The 24-year-old is the third mates this is not possible.

who scored the winning goal in

Donadoni's axe will in fact fall on Fiorentina midfielder Riccardo when he chops the final surplus Celtic celebrate title

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic players were ecstatic after winning the Scottish Premier League title in dramatic fashion following their 1-0 them all wrong." win at Dundee United on Thursday. Dutch striker Jan Vennegoor of

gameinthe72ndminute. But Celtic would still have lifted their 42nd Scottish league title even if they had lost, after Aberdeen won 2-0 athome to Rangers. Celtic captain Stephen McManus

was ecstatic with the victory - espe-

cially after the Parkhead side had

been written off at the start of April

when they trailed Rangers by six

points having played two more

Hesselink was the Parkhead side's

hero, scoring the only goal of the

didn't lack motivation to do win tonight and make sure we won it off our own backs. "Six or seven weeks ago everyone wrote us off but we also believed we

> "I was thinking about him during the game as he meant so much to everyone at Celtic." And goalscorer Vennegoor of Hesselink said: "It's a great feeling for

> could still win it and it's great to prove

will be looking down on us tonight and

itwasgreatto be able to win it for him.

Aiden McGeady added: "Tommy

me and a great day for the club. "It didn't really matter who scored but it's always nice to score the goal which wins the league." Both Celtic and Rangers had started their matches level on 86

points, although Celtic had a goal

advantage of four.

by the sending off of Nacho Novo for a horrific tackle on Stuart Duff. The Spaniard will now miss the

domestic cup double.

charge, a 2-1 win over Switzerland, while Rio Ferdinand took the armband for England's last match, a 1-0 friendly defeat by France in Paris at the end of March. John Terry, the captain under Capello's predecessor Steve McClaren, is also a candidate for

the role and will be hoping to be given the chance to display his leadership credentials against the United States on Wednesday. Monday.