



France striker Nicolas Anelka (L) and defender Patrice Evra race during a training session in Clairefontaine on Wednesday.

Corluka leaves City for Spurs

INTERNET, undated

Tottenham new boy Vedran Corluka is adamant he has no regrets after leaving newly cash-rich Manchester City for a move to White Hart Lane.

Corluka expected to join Spurs weeks ago when City agreed a fee for his services and he underwent a medical, only for the Eastlands outfit to call him back at the last minute.

The deal eventually went through on deadline day, though, and the Croatia defender admits he was relieved to finally seal his switch to north London.

"It was a big relief because lots of things happened in the last two or three weeks," Corluka told The Sun.

"First the club decided to sell me but then they stopped the transfer.

"I didn't expect that City would let me go. But they did and to a good club, a big club so I am happy."

Corluka left City on the day it was announced the club is to be taken over by new owners the Abu Dhabi United Group, and they immediately flexed their financial muscle to bring in Robinho from Real Madrid in a new British record transfer deal.

Despite City's new-found wealth, Corluka believes Tottenham can match City's ambitions of playing in the UEFA Champions League.

"Everything is not just money," added Corluka. "Tottenham is a great team and we have the squad to get into the Champions League."

"My chances of getting there are the same as if I had stayed at City."

I'm Italian, insists Balotelli

AFP, Castel Di Sangro

Inter Milan's teenage star Mario Balotelli pinned his colours firmly to Italy on Thursday by insisting that he does not want to play for the land of his forefathers.

Balotelli was born in Palermo to Ghanaian immigrants, whose surname is Barwuah, but when he was three years old he was entrusted to an Italian family, called Balotelli.

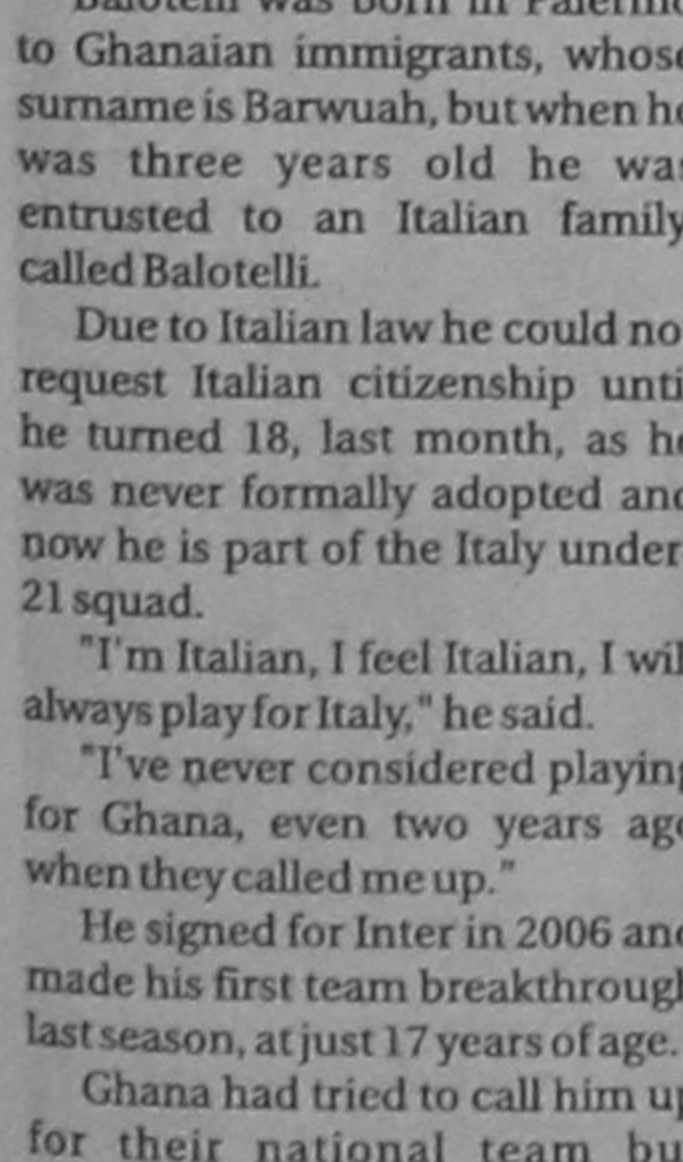
Due to Italian law he could not request Italian citizenship until he turned 18, last month, as he was never formally adopted and now he is part of the Italy under-21 squad.

"I'm Italian, I feel Italian, I will always play for Italy," he said.

"I've never considered playing for Ghana, even two years ago when they called me up."

He signed for Inter in 2006 and made his first team breakthrough last season, at just 17 years of age.

Ghana had tried to call him up for their national team but Balotelli turned them down several times to pursue his dream of playing for Italy.



Brazil superstar Ronaldo controls the ball during his physiotherapy at Flamengo's Gavea field in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday.

Kahn to be a TV pundit

Football

AFP, Berlin

He may have officially retired following his testimonial in Munich this week, but former Germany captain and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn already has a busy programme planned to fill in the gaps when he would have been training or playing.

The 39-year-old was in Bayern Munich's goal for the last time on Tuesday night at the Allianz Arena when a Germany XI were held to a 1-1 draw by Bayern.

But having won the Champions League and played in the 2002 World Cup final, Kahn will be just as busy in his new career as a pundit and talent spotter for Bayern.

"Expert? I will never actually use this word to describe myself," said Kahn in his usual blunt style.

But having been the victim himself of over-critical pundits in the past, Kahn says he will guard against misinterpretation of what he sees on the pitch.

"Some people lean on the side of over-interpretation," he said.

"For me there is no retirement, I am the sort of person who likes to stay busy and I will start attacking my new life this month," said Kahn, who has the third highest amount of appearances in the Bundesliga with 557.

"There is no new life, only another period of my life."

But football will still play a huge role.

Next Wednesday, he will begin his new role as an expert pundit for German television station ZDF when Germany play Finland in Helsinki in a World Cup 2010 qualifier.

"I'll be on the look out for goalkeeping talent for Bayern.

"That is an enormous task, because there is no real club structure in China," said Kahn.

"Plus there is the sheer size of the country."

Kahn will search through hours of video tape of Chinese club games before expanding his search to Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia before a possible scouting mission to visit the countries.

And Kahn also has plans to set up a football academy for schoolchildren in Bavaria where he will preach the values of being a good goalkeeper.

"I will try to make clear to the pupils that talent alone is not enough," said Kahn.

"One succeeds in life only with perseverance, hard work and the will to achieve," said Kahn, who was capped 87 times for Germany.

"You don't have to be the best to win - just the most persistent."

Robinho hits back

Football

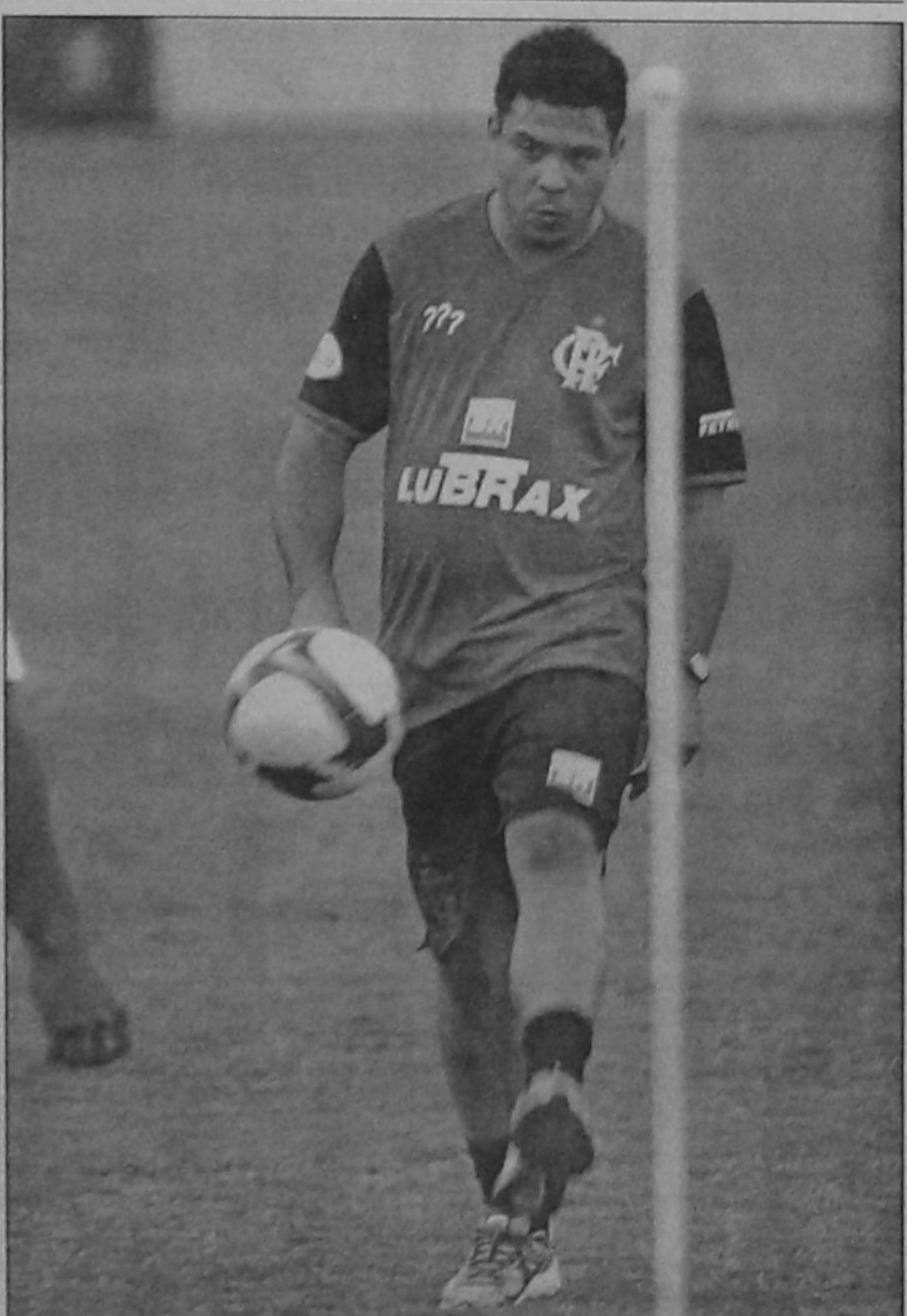
INTERNET, undated

Madrid on Monday in a shock transfer-deadline-day move after having looked on course for a transfer to Chelsea.

City - bankrolled by prospective new owners the Abu Dhabi United Group - stepped in to meet the asking price and Pele is reported to have said Robinho "needs some serious counselling" as he had been "badly advised" by people close to him.

Robinho has responded to reports Pele has criticised him for joining Manchester City, insisting the Brazil icon would have done the same.

Former Santos forward Robinho, 24, joined City from Real



Brazil superstar Ronaldo controls the ball during his physiotherapy at Flamengo's Gavea field in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday.

However, Robinho has stressed the move to City is the right one.

"I accept Pele's criticism as he is the king of football, but if he had been me, he would have done the same," said Robinho, who arrived in Teresopolis in a helicopter yesterday to train with the national team ahead of the World Cup qualifiers against Chile and Bolivia.

"Real did not want to retain me. They even used me as a potential exchange to sign Cristiano Ronaldo. But as that negotiation fell through, they wanted to retain me then."

"If they didn't want to count on me, I didn't want to stay there either, so that is what I told the president."

Robinho also admitted his first intention was to move to Chelsea to be coached by Luiz Felipe Scolari but a number of issues led to Real Madrid cancelling negotiations.

"My first goal was to go to Chelsea as it was the only club to have made a formal offer," he added. "But Real did not like Chelsea shirts with my name on being sold before sorting out the negotiations."

"Also, they did not reach the value Real demanded so then Manchester City came in at the last minute to sign me."

Robinho conceded Real not releasing him to play at the Olympic Games was one of the main reasons why he quit the Spanish side to join City.

The Primera Liga giants denied the forward the chance to play in Beijing last month claiming the Brazilian had an injury, but the forward became angry with the club's board and asked president Ramon Calderon for a move away from the Estadio Santiago Bernabeu.

"I cried when he (Calderon) didn't let me play at the Olympics and you can check that by asking him," said Robinho.

"I didn't cry to quit. I just told him I didn't want to stay there any longer so I asked to be transferred."

Milan, Fiorentina fans banned

AFP, Rome

Following the violence and destruction caused by Napoli fans in Rome on the opening Serie A weekend of the season, AC Milan and Fiorentina supporters will be banned from travelling to their club's next away matches.

The decision has been taken by the Committee for the analysis of security at sporting events (Casms), the body charged with discipline in the country's football leagues.

Napoli fans were on Monday night barred from all away matches this season by Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni.

And now Casms has said that in next weekend's championship matches Milan fans will be excluded from their match in Genoa while Fiorentina's fans will not be allowed to attend their game in Napoli, in both cases due to concerns over potential crowd trouble.

The game in Napoli may even be played behind closed doors.

But Italy captain and Real Madrid centre-back Fabio Cannavaro, who is from Napoli, said it is not just his home-town fans who are a problem.

"It's not just a problem with Napoli but with the whole country," said Cannavaro. "Right now I wouldn't take my kids to an Italian stadium."

"I'm proud of being Neapolitan but sadly problems happen everywhere. Shamefully there is a movement that is not turning away from violence. They need to start respecting the rules."

Casms also decided to elevate security measures for Italy's World Cup qualifier against Georgia in Udine on September 10 and will look into the possibility of banning away fans from other Serie A matches throughout the season.

But despite the trouble on Sunday, where a train from Napoli to Rome was vandalised and 20 buses in the capital destroyed by Napoli fans, Palermo's chief of Police Antonio Manganelli believes violence is subsiding in the country.

Last February Italian police officer Filippo Raciti was killed during football violence surrounding the Sicilian derby between Catania and Palermo and Lazio fan Gabriele Sandri was shot dead by a policeman in November after clashes between Lazio and Juventus fans broke out at a service station.

"Despite Raciti's murder incidents in stadiums have diminished and so too even injuries sustained by forces of order and spectators," said Manganelli.

"Now incidents are being controlled which is encouraging decent fans and families to return to stadiums."

Pato vows win

AFP, Milan

AC Milan's teenage striker Pato said the Italian giants' next match away to Genoa is a win or bust game.

Milan suffered a shock 2-1 home defeat to newly-promoted Bologna in their opening game of the season and they know they must bounce back to avoid drifting out of the title race while it is still in its infancy.

The six-time European champions scuppered their scudetto hopes last season by failing to win any of their opening seven home league matches.

"We're sorry for the loss against Bologna but it was only the first match," said the 19-year-old. "There will be many more, the championship is long and I'm convinced this Milan team can do very well."

"Now we're thinking only about working hard. Over the next few days we can train and prepare ourselves really well, and against Genoa we absolutely have to win."

Milan's only saving grace was that none of their title rivals won with Inter Milan held at Sampdoria, AS Roma drawing at home to Napoli and Fiorentina and Juventus ending in a stalemate.

Defoe to stake claim

Football

AFP, London

Jermain Defoe believes the time has finally come for him to step into Michael Owen's shoes and fire the goals to help England qualify for the 2010 World Cup.

Defoe has always been regarded as Owen's deputy in the England attack and has been forced to bide his time since making his debut for the national side four years ago.

But with Owen being left out of the squad for the opening World Cup qualifiers against Andorra and Croatia, Defoe knows he will not get a better chance to stake his claim for a permanent place in the England side.

Defoe is brimming with confidence following his move to Portsmouth back in January and is clearly benefiting from a regular place in the first-team.

The prolific forward is now hoping to transform his impressive club form onto the international stage and prove he is good enough to become a major star for England.

Defoe said: "I feel ready, I feel like it's my time. But I won't take anything for granted. I just want to keep learning, improving and working hard in training, which I do."

"But it's great when you get an opportunity. Everyone wants to play. It doesn't matter what position you're in, you want to be on the pitch. It's the best thing in the world to play for your country and I'm feeling confident right now."

Poldi's point to prove

Football

AFP, Berlin

Germany striker Lukas Podolski has a point to prove to his club Bayern Munich when Die Mannschaft start their 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign in Liechtenstein on Saturday.

Despite shining brightly for Germany at both last June's Euro 2008 and the 2006 World Cup, Podolski is bitterly unhappy about the prospect of facing another season on Bayern's bench.

The 23-year-old has scored 28 goals for Germany in 55 appearances, but can not command a starting place at Bayern having made



Germany striker Lukas Podolski (R) and midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger practise during a training session in Oberhaching on Wednesday.

Final push for top teams

Football

AFP, Singapore

Asia's top teams get their final push towards the World Cup finals in South Africa underway on Saturday with Japan facing a tricky encounter in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia battling Ali Daei's Iran.

Of the 46 Asian Football Confederation nations who dreamed of making the finals in 2010, just 10 remain in the hunt -- Australia, Bahrain, Japan, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the two Koreas, UAE and Uzbekistan.

Four will qualify automatically, with the three-placed teams in the two groups of five playing-off for the right to meet the Oceania representative, likely New Zealand, for a spot at the global showpiece.

Japan, arguably the continent's football power and a team that has qualified for the last three World Cups, goes into its clash against Bahrain in Manama desperate to take all three points.

"As I have always said, this match will be the most important for us," said coach Takeshi Okada.

"I think it will be a tough match. But if we overcome this, our team can step up further. So we want to take the first match no matter what."

Okada hasn't had a particularly good lead-up, with a 3-1 home defeat by Uruguay last month raising concerns. But with Celtic's Shunsuke Nakamura back in the fold, albeit with a right ankle injury, he is confident.

"I see this (defeat to Uruguay) as a blessing in disguise. It's better to get a tough game in, rather than get thrashed by Bahrain right off the bat."

Bahrain are in better shape, beating Burkina Faso and United Arab Emirates in warm-ups.

With Australia playing a friendly against Holland on Saturday, the other Group A match sees Qatar take on Uzbekistan in Doha.

Qatar are without four key players -- the injured Musad Al Hamad and

Yusef Ahmed and the suspended Wisam Rizq and Hussain Yasser.

Coch Jorje Fossati insists he has a strong complement of reserves.

"I know how important these players are to Qatar's performance and I was really hoping they would be able to play in this match," the Uruguayan coach reports.

"But as a coach I am expected to look for solutions and I will not call new players and make do with the reserves I have."

In Group B, plenty is at stake in Riyadh for heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran.

With South Korea, Asia's most successful team on the world stage having qualified for the past six World Cups, also in the group but not playing Saturday, dropping points could prove costly.

Iranian coach Ali Daei said he had a decent squad capable of doing all the way.

"The current group of players are the best in Iranian football, they are highly motivated, ambitious and their only aim is the success of the national team," he told reporters.

"Saudi Arabia is our traditional opponent with good players and team composition, but we have prepared ourselves with tactical trainings for this encounter."

He has five European-based players at his disposal -- Vahid Hashemian, Ferydon Zandi, Masoud Shojaei, Javad Nekounam and Andranik Teymourian.

The Saudis are aiming to qualify for their fifth consecutive World Cup and coach Nasser Al-Johar is expecting his players to deliver the goods.

"We want to win this group, and book qualification early," he told the FIFA website.

In the other Group B game, emerging power United Arab Emirates play North Korea in Abu Dhabi, the oil-rich sheikhdom still celebrating after Emirati billionaire Sulaiman al-Fahim bought Manchester City.

The final phase of Asian qualifying features 10 rounds of matches, culminating in June next year.

feel sharper and stronger. That comes with games. Hopefully I can get a lot sharper now as games go on.

"If you feel sharper it's normal to believe that if you get a chance you will take it. It's fitness as well. I've had a good pre-season. I've worked hard and I feel a lot stronger. I'm looking forward to these games now."

Defoe has been used to playing in a two-man attack throughout his career and is relishing the chance to play alongside Peter Crouch at Portsmouth this season.

But England coach Fabio Capello has already shown that he is ready to use Wayne Rooney in a position just off the striker.

Defoe admits he will have no problems adjusting to a new formation and still feels he can produce his best form if Capello continues to use that system.

He said: "That is not a problem for me because we've got legs in the team. We've got fit players in the team: players who want to get forward, get into the box and get on the end of crosses and things like that."

"When the ball comes up to me I know I've got options. I've got players close to me, people who want the ball. We've got quality players. So it's not a problem."

"Even when I play with Crouchie sometimes I drop in and try to get involved a little bit more. The game has changed now and I don't think there's a problem because you're going to have players close to you."

"When you are playing well at club level and you do get selected for your country you seem to take that form into international football.

"You want to play in massive tournaments, you want to play for your country. I'm really looking forward to the challenge. I believe that if I just keep working hard and keep learning then hopefully I can do that."

Defoe was a fans favourite at his former club Tottenham, but the talented forward could never cement a regular place in the team.

Defoe was always battling with Robbie Keane and Dimitar Berbatov for a place in the side and could never get into the rhythm of playing regular top-flight football.

Things have now changed following his move to Fratton Park and Defoe admits he is a confidence player and is now performing at the top of his game.

Defoe added: "It was just getting a fair chance. Just playing football again and being happy. It was a difficult time at Spurs towards the end. I was there three-and-a-half years and really enjoyed my time."

"I had some great moments. The fans were fantastic, the lads and everyone involved in the football club."

"But there comes a time when you feel like you need to move on and just play football to be happy again. That's what happened. Looking back I'm so happy I made that decision."

"When I signed for Portsmouth, after a few games it was great. You

just four starts last season in the German league and one of the three so far this term.

Podolski is set to face Liechtenstein on Saturday in Vaduz and Finland in Helsinki next Wednesday in their Group 4 qualifying games.

But having been told by Bayern manager Uli Hoeness to accept his place on the bench - while coach Jurgen Klinsmann says he needs to "step on the gas" - Podolski has a point to prove to his Bayern bosses.

"I can't accept being told to stop whining about the situation," an annoyed Podolski told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung after hearing Hoeness's comments.

Since joining Bayern in July 2006, Podolski failed to impress in his first

season and struggled for chances in his second behind first-choice forward Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni.

And he has given his strongest indication yet about his desire to leave Bayern.

"If I had known how things were going to go this season, I would not have extended my contract," he told German tabloid Bild.

"I am unhappy and bitter that I am not playing from the start of matches and have been left on the bench again."

Podolski says he will consider his options when the transfer window re-opens in January.

He said: "The point arrives where one says: it gets on my nerves! I am not progressing here! I can't put up with this any longer!"

Having spent last season as third-choice striker under Ottmar Hitzfeld, Podolski now finds himself in the same position under new Bayern coach Klinsmann.

And he is annoyed to be down the pecking order with his rival Klose struggling for form in recent months.

"I don't see myself as third choice," said Podolski.

Germany coach Joachim Loew is a confirmed Lukas Podolski fan.

"When you look at his performances at the 2005 Confederations Cup, the World Cup and Euro 2008, Lukas has always completely answered his critics - something not even Cristiano Ronaldo has always done," said Loew on Thursday.

"From my experience, Lukas is not the sort of player who whines, he is very professional."

"The fact he is not happy at the moment is normal - in fact it would be unprofessional if he was content with the situation."

"But he must fight for his place at Bayern and learn everything he is told."

With the Bundesliga currently on a two-week break, Podolski will resume his quest for a Bayern place for their next game - against his old club Cologne on September 13.

Premier League clubs Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur have both expressed an interest in signing him.

But Podolski has made no secret of his desire to return to Cologne - his "first love" - and his marriage to Bayern certainly appears to be on the rocks.