

Croatia star Luka Modric (R) is challenged by teammate Vedran Corluka during a training session in Brezice, Slovenia on Monday. Croatia will take on England in a 2010 World Cup qualifying match in Zagreb on Wednesday.

Much to do for France, England

AFP, Paris



haunt France and England as the former world champions embark on crucial midweek 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

Memories of England's sole triumph are sepia-tinted in going back to 1966 - but at least they picked up three points, albeit at the expense of little Andorra, in their opening game, while a directionless France were capitulating 3-1 in Austria.

Memories of France's 1998 triumph are a little fresher - but in footballing terms they were eons away from that level in Vienna, conceding a trio of soft goals which render imperative a win over Serbia at the Stade de France on Wednesday.

But it is England's ghosts which are chronologically the closest as they head for Zagreb to take on a Croatian side which did the double over them in the Euro 2008 qualifiers.

Those defeats exposed the gulf which has opened up between the undeniable kudos of a domestic game crammed with foreigners and a national team hyped up as their main rivals. comprising a "golden generation" which stubbornly refused to glitter under Sven-Goran Eriksson and then the hapless Steve McClaren.

Hot-shot striker

Lukas Podolski

aims to continue

his purple patch

against Finland on

Wednesday as

Germany look to

win their second

straightWorldCup2010 qualifier.

The 23-year-old Bayern Munich

forward scored twice in Saturday's

6-0 rout of minnows Liechtenstein

in their opening qualifier on the

road to South Africa and hopes to

add to the 30 goals he has scored for

hopefully I can continue my scoring

streak for a while. I'll try my best

against Finland," said Podolski

Helsinki's Olympic Stadium.

ahead of Wednesday night's clash at

warns Germany face a much

tougher opponent in Finland and

will need to exploit Podolski's cur-

rent form to leave Helsinki with

But defender Philipp Lahm

"I feel very confident right now,

new order England know another failure for a major tournament is just not acceptable - and Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard recognises as much.

"I think we've under-achieved as a group over the past couple of years - that's a fact," acknowledged

"Technically they are very good," said Lampard of the

they beat us twice in the Euro 2008 qualifiers but they ended up being the dark horses of the Euros. They aren't to be taken lightly.

the bag certainly helps." For Capello, "Croatia will be

another game, not like Andorra." But with the potential banana skin of Andorra safely negotiated the Italian said he believed his squad would now show their mettle.

"Are England good enough to get a result? Yes, I think so. I am confident in my team," he insisted.

With only the group winner guaranteed a place in the finals in South Africa - the best runners up face playoffs - a draw would appear a minimum requirement against

The Croatians, since bolstered by the news that Slaven Bilic will stay in the hotseat and not return to former club West Ham, brushed

"We have to keep providing our

strikers with plenty of possession in

the penalty area, Lukas has already

shown how dangerous he can be if

he has the ball on his left foot," said

Bayern defender Lahm, who will

football from Liechtenstein.

"Finland play a different brand of

"Their team is good in defence

"The Fins will come at us with

"If we keep our passing tight and

Germany have a strong record

controlled, we will create our

dominate defence-minded teams."

against Finland - they have won 15

of the 20 matches between the two

countries and their only defeat

Stuart Baxter, Finland can take heart

from their scoreless draw with

and tactically very strong, our

defence will be tested much more

Podolski confident

win his 50th cap.

thoroughly.

chances.

came in 1923.

plenty of aggression.

Under the sergeant-majorish aside Kazakhstan, whom England approach of Fabio Capello and his host on October 11, in their opener.

France, meanwhile, appeared still shell-shocked from their dismal Euro showing as they collapsed in Austria, a loss which ramped up the pressure on beleaguered coach Raymond Domenech, who nonetheless remains in defiant mood. "This event is not based on one

game. Of course I'd rather have taken the points - but who said we were going to win every match? We'll be ready to take on Serbia on "Everyone was up in arms that Wednesday," insisted the eccentric Domenech, adding he believed the will to win burned strongly within a squad in a period of transition.

"This is a young team but I am "Having three points already in not worried about it," Domenech concluded.

Even so, the French group looks an open one with the wildcard Serbs Having seen off the Faroes and a gifted but unpredictable Romania having failed to benefit from the French setback in sliding to a 3-0 home loss to Lithuania.

Lithuania now face the Austrians while Domenech will hope that a visit to the French camp of world champion keeper Fabien Barthez will boost morale.

"He has the requisite qualities and can pass on his experience," says Domenech.

France may suffer, though, from the closure of part of the stadium reducing capacity from 80,000 to nearer 45,000 - a suggestion the

Germany in Gelsenkirchen in 2001,

the last time the sides met, and the

midfielders - Jari Lirmanen is

injured while Alexei Eremenko Jr

was not selected due to a drink-

But Baxter has a very experi-

"We have a strong team," he said.

As a former coach of the South

"We believe in our skills and in our

African football team, Baxter

would love to take Finland to the

nextWorld Cup, but faces an uphill

shares with Germany, Russia and

group. Germany and Russia are top

teams and in addition the Welsh are

quite capable of surprising people,

said Baxter, a former England

"We were drawn into a tricky

enced side who are looking to upset

Germany in their opening World

Finland are without two key

home side have nothing to lose.

driving conviction.

Cup qualifier.

"We have already shown we can task in Group 4 which his side

But under English head coach especially against top-class teams,"

Wales

Under-19 coach.

Germany, meanwhile, are seem-

French Federation was quick to

reject and idea that fans had "fallen

out of love" with the side since Euro

ingly on the up once more having reached the final of Euro 2008 and begun their World Cup road to South Africa with a 6-0 swatting of

charges to Finland promising more of the same before group rivals Russia, who Wednesday host Wales, come calling next month.

try to play attacking football in Finland as we did in Liechtenstein though the Finns are a much better side," said Loew.

Schalke defender Christian Pander will sit out the game with a virus for the Germans, who will be wary after drawing home and away with the Finns in qualifiers seven

World champions Italy host Georgia without midfield stalwart Gennaro Gattuso, who injured his wrist in training, while defenders Fabio Grosso and Alessandro Gamberini are also out having suffered injuries in the fortuitous 2-

the possibility of calling up replacements, however.

his anterior cruciate ligament, the

Long layoff

for Essien

AFP, London

club said Tuesday.

Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien has been ruled out of action for "several months" after rupturing

The 25-year-old sustained the injury while on international duty with Ghana and a Chelsea statement said: "Michael has ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament and will undergo an operation as soon as the majority of the swelling has subsided. We expect this to happen in a week's time.

"In the meantime, Michael has started rehab in the aqua therapy centre at Cobham (Chelsea's training ground south of London) which will improve the condition of the knee prior to surgery.

"A return to full fitness is not expected for several months."

The news he will miss a major chunk of the season is a major blow to a club which suffered a series of injury woes last season as the Blues ultimately failed to keep pace with English Premiership champions Manchester United.

joined Chelsea in 2005 from French side Lyon and signed a new fiveyear deal in July.

Ribery set for UCL

Bayern Munich midfielder Franck Ribery is on course to play in the Champions League later this month and has impressed coach Jurgen Klinsmann with his "brutal" rehab work following ankle surgery.

French star Ribery tore ankle ligaments playing for France in the group stage defeat at the hands of Italy during Euro 2008 last June, but resumed full training with the Bayern squad on Monday.

The 25-year-old hopes to be back in first-team action before Bayern's Champions League clash with Lyon at the end of the month as the German giants open their campaign against Steaua Bucharest next Wednesday in Romania.

"It's all going very well for him, and we're extremely happy with his progress," said Klinsmann.

"Franck resumed full training at the start of the week.

"The point at which he makes a full comeback now depends on how he feels.

"He's been really brutal on himself in rehab training recently, which is often more rigorous and demanding than training with the

"We'll bring him back step by Coach Marcello Lippi, who will step, so he acclimatises to the movements we make as a team nowadays."

But Klinsmann is pleased there have been no problems with Ribery's damaged ankle.

"We've been very careful to avoid anything which might provoke a reaction in the ligament which was surgically repaired, but it's now completely healed, that's what the doctors have guaranteed," said Klinsmann.

"It's now all about him recovering his rhythm and confidence, the belief you need for one-on-one situations for example."

Italy call up Nocerino

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Marcello Lippi on Monday called up midfielder Antonio Nocerino in place of injured Gennaro Gattuso for the 2010 World Cup qualifier against Georgia midweek. It will be the first call up to the A

squad for Palermo's Nocerino, 23. Gattuso injured his left wrist during training Sunday and will be sidelined for at least a month.

Injured defenders Alessandro Gamberini and Fabio Grosso will not, however, be replaced for Wednesday's game in Udine. The duo picked up their injuries during Saturday's 2-1 win over Cyprus.

Bouma extends with Villa

AFP, Birmingham

Dutch defender Wilfred Bouma is to remain with Aston Villa after signing a new two-year contract extension with the Premier League

Bouma, 30, established himself as the first-choice left back with the Midlands side following the arrival of Martin O'Neill as manager.

He'd previously struggled to secure a first team place after joining Villa in August 2006.

Bouma is currently out of action having sustained a dislocated ankle against Odense in the Intertoto Cup. Following that injury, O'Neill

signed Nicky Shorey from Reading for an undisclosed fee. Nervertheless, Bouma has

earned a new deal, which included an option for a third year.

Brazil on the rise

AFP, Montevideo



Olympic glory may Argentina but it is Brazil's star which is currently rising o FIFA in the Latin American World

Cup qualifiers.

A weekend draw against Paraguay was Argentina's fourth winless match whereas Brazil are on the up after following up on a sticky start with a 3-0 win in Chile. Now the top sides play the bot-

tom sides in midweek action which will determine which sides are on track to make it to the finals in South Africa in 2010. Ahead of their home encounter

with tail-enders Bolivia coach Dunga said Brazil were coming to the boil.

"The win in Chile essentially shows we are on the right path, Dunga told reporters, adding that the calendar of regional qualifiers was difficult given the far-flung nature of much of the squad.

"We had players who had not The industrious Ghanaian | been active for a month and of course that influences the team's performance," he said in part explanation for the team's relatively slow start.

Brazil should have no trouble against Bolivia, who while often a threat on their own high-altitude Venezuelans.

patch do not travel well. The Brazilians traditionally have a patchy spell before finding some of the form which led to five

world titles. A loss to Honduras in the Copa brought three wins and a draw. America in 2001 brought major opprobrium but under coach Liuz Felipe Scolari the samba stars still won the World Cup a year later.

The win in Chile, thanks to a brace from Luis Fabiano and another goal from Manchester City's new signing Robinho, has lifted some of the clouds away and more importantly lifted the pressure on Dunga.

Referring to Bolivia, Dunga insisted that "in football every rival has to be respected. Teams considered favourites can fall victim to a surprise result. So we have to be humble."

Paraguay lead the group with 14 points from seven matches, and despite their recent poor run Argentina, away to Peru on Wednesday, are still in touch on 12 though the Brazilians have now overtaken them on goal difference.

After early pace-setters FIXTURES Paraguay host modest Venezuela on Tuesday in what looks like a home banker, Wednesday sees the off-colour Argentines head for Peru, fresh from a win over the

Alfio Basile's Argentina will fancy their chances of putting an end to their bad run as their last defeat in Peru was came back in 1985 and their last four visits

Chile host a Colombia side which has fallen from grace since the days of Carlos Valderrama and lost to Uruguay, who now host

Ecuador, at the weekend.

The two-times world champion Uruguayans, who meet Ecuador, currently fill the fourth automatic qualifying spot by a single point from the Colombians and Chile with Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru and Bolivia bringing up the rear.

Fifth place is still worth having in the group as that country would make it to the finals if they can beat a CONCACAF region side in a playoff.

But even the top sides have much to prove as, today, it is Europe which is in the ascendancy with Brazil and Argentina ranking just sixth and seventh in the current FIFA list behind Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland and Croatia.

Tuesday

ParaguayvVenezuela Wednesday

Peru v Argentina, Chile v Colombia. Uruguay v Ecuador, Brazil v Bolivia

Socceroos enter on a high

AFP, Singapore



Wednesday on a high after beating the Netherlands over the weekend, as Qatar and

Australia enter the

North Korea look to continue their winning ways. The Socceroos went further than any other Asian team at the

to eventual winners Italy 1-0 following a disputed last-minute Coach Pim Verbeek said their 2-1 friendly win over the Dutch in Eindhoven was the ideal prepara-

round of qualifiers. "For us it was the perfect warmup match," said Verbeek. "I saw

improve. While ecstatic with the victory, captain Lucas Neill warned his side not to be complacent or underestimate Uzbekistan, with conditions in Tashkent likely to be considerably tougher than the ideal weather in Holland.

again and put in a similar kind of

performance," he told reporters.

The Uzbekis, tipped by many as a dark horse of the competition, are desperate for a win after crashing 3-0 to Qatar in the extreme heat of Doha on Saturday.

That stunning victory for Jorge Fossati's team raised the bar in Group A, which also includes Bahrain and Japan. Japan, who beat Bahrain 3-2 in

play on Wednesday, leaving the team from the tiny Sultanate to make the short trip to Doha to try and salvage their campaign. While delighted to see his side

topple Uzbekistan, Fossati stressed he was not taking Bahrain lightly. "We respect all our opponents and Bahrain's defeat

against Japan doesn't mean that we should underestimate Korea. them," he said.

reachit." In Group B South Korea, who have qualified for the past six World Cups, get their campaign under-

way in Shanghai against their The match was moved from Pyongyang after North Korea

refused to let the South play its

national anthem and fly its flag at

the game, with inter-Korean rela-

tions frosty since President Lee Myung-Bak took office in Seoul.

South Korea go into the game with a 1-0 warm-up win over Jordan under their belts from Friday, while a defensive North Korea upset United Arab Emirates 2-1 in Abu Dhabi for the perfect start to their World Cup drive.

"Obviously we are happy with the result," North Korean coach Kim Jong-Hun told reporters. "We still have a long way to go but it's a good start. Iran, who drew 1-1 in Riyadh

with Saudi Arabia in their opener, rest on Wednesday with the Saudis playing UAE in the other Group B UAE coach Bruno Metsu insists

he has not lost faith in his team despite their painful loss to North "We still have seven matches

and everything is possible." said the Frenchman. "We can still go on and win our next match with Saudi Arabia and win the return match in Korea. So we are not out of the

in June next year with the top two teams from each group automatically qualifying for the

to the global showpiece.

Brazilian footballers (L to R) Fernando Baiano, Marcio Rosario and Rafael Sobis pose with coach Abel Braga, wearing the jerseys of the their new club al-Jazira, in Abu Dhabi on Sunday. Sobis signed a five-season deal worth 11

Lippi to stick to Toni

AFP, Rome

AFP, Berlin

his country.



Italy coach Marcelo Lippi admitted he would ring the changes for Wednesday's World 1172 Cup qualifier against Georgia in Udine but said he would likely stick by under-fire forward Luca Toni.

Toni had a disastrous Euro 2008, failing to score and generally inviting ridicule for some inept performances.

But Lippi kept faith with the big Bayern Munich striker and fielded him from the start in a threepronged attack in Larnaca on then I'll make three changes Saturday, where Antonio Di Natale through the course of the match. scored an injury time winner to embarrassing opening result to and to play the best possible." their qualification campaign.

3-3 formation in favour of 4-4-2, introducing AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso in place of Toni.

Italy's formation was a controversial topic under Lippi's predecessor Roberto Donadoni, who used the 4-3-3 system in their first match at Euro 2008, only to change it after a 3-0 humiliation at the hands of the Netherlands.

more faith in his chosen formation. "I'll definitely change some players with respects to Larnaca," said Lippi. "I still believe in the three-pronged attack but I'll start with three or four new players and

"The aim is to grow, to win, to save the world champions from an have as few problems as possible

Italy were so disappointing in However, Lippi hauled Toni off Cyprus that Lippi even admitted

at half-time and abandoned his 4- afterwards they had been fortunate to come away with a victory. Things started badly with

defenders Alessandro Gamberini and Fabio Grosso leaving the field injured and they have both been ruled out of Wednesday's match.

With Juventus centre-back Giorgio Chiellini -- Italy's one success story from Austria and Switzerland in June -- already Lippi, though, seems to have sidelined, the azzurri are short of cover at the back with Wolfsburg's Andrea Barzagli likely to partner captain Fabio Cannavaro at centre-

> defensive midfielder Gattuso broke and dislocated his wrist in a freak training ground fall that rules him out of action for a month. Despite all the difficulties,

To make matters even worse,

though, Lippi can at least rely on Di Natale, who will be playing in front of his home fans in Udine.

Liechtenstein. Joachim Loew now takes his

"We will go for the win and will

years ago.

1 weekend win in Cyprus. hope Saturday brace scorer Antonio Di Natale dons his shooting boots once more, has eschewed

"We have a lot of work ahead of us that starts in the Olympic Stadium against Germany." Baxter has plenty of experience with Liverpool veteran Sami Hyypia and ex-Ajax forward Jari Litmanen

Forssell and Werder Bremen defender Petri Pasanen who ply their trade in Germany. "There are young players in the squad, who have just broken through and they will get their chance, but at the moment we need experience from the likes of

alongside Hanover striker Mikael

Hyypia and Litmanen," said After failing to help South Africa qualify for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, Baxter succeeded compatriot Roy Hodgson as Finland coach in January 2008 and the 55-

year-old says he is impressed with whathe has seen. "We have a good crew and there is a lot of optimism, my task is to maintain that," he said. "It is an exciting challenge, I believe in

positive result.'

However, the veteran coach stopped short of suggestions from

armband for the game. "To the Udine public I can say that Di Natale will play, not because he is their idol but because he

"Captain? I think that would be

deserves to," said Lippi.

the press that the Udinese winger

should be given the captain's

going too far, Cannavaro will play and this is not a festival. "Whether or not Toni plays, you'll find that out tomorrow (Wednesday). To his fans in Bavaria I can only say turn on your televisions, tune in and that way you'll be able to satisfy your curiosity."

Georgia are hardly in good shape themselves and lost 2-1 to Ireland in their opening nominally-home match on Saturday -- a game that due to the recent war with Russia was played in Germany.

For all Italy's worries, though,

Manama over the weekend, don't last World Cup in Germany where they made the last 16 before losing

tion for their opening game against Uzbekistan in Tashkent in the final

good things, I saw things we have to

"The coach and I have already stressed that, as good as the win was, it will count for nothing on Wednesday, so we'll have to start

"We have finished the first step and completed 16 per cent of our campaign but we still have 84 per cent to go. Our target is still far away and we must work very hard to

northern neighbours.

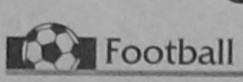
race yet." The Asian round culminates

2010 finals. The two third-placed teams play-off for the right to meet Oceania representative New Zealand for the final slot available



million euros (15.7 million dollars) with the United Arab Emirates team.

Axing Park was tough



AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has admitted that axing Park Ji-Sung from his squad for last season's Champions League final against Chelsea was the "hardest decision I have ever had to make.'

United went on to lift their third European Cup following a dramatic penalty shoot-out victory in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium on May 21, but South Korean midfielder Park was the stands, sat in his club suit, eighteen-man squad by man- tough as any. ager Ferguson.

action last December, the former PSV Eindhoven star had appeared to have made himself a key figure as United closed in on a Premier League and Champions League double. But the 27-year-old still

missed out on a place on the bench in Moscow.

Ferguson, despite selling the likes of David Beckham and Ruud van Nistelrooy and ruthlessly dropping high-profile players such as Jim Leighton, Bryan Robson and Steve Bruce forced to watch the game from from FA Cup Final teams during his reign as United boss, admits

"It was a terrible decision to chose to go with Nani."

serious knee injury to return to was the hardest decision I have ever had to make because Ji-Sung had played such a great part in the previous games against Roma and Barcelona. "But I had Owen Hargreaves for that game in Moscow

Having fought back from a have to take. In many ways it

one for that specific game. Then I had the decision of choosing our seven substitutes and which players could have an impact on the game. "You look for a mix of defenders, midfielders and

because I felt he was the right

attackers and I opted to go with Nani ahead of Ji-Sung, simply because I think Nani has got a after being omitted from the his decision to axe Park was as goal in him. That was the only distinction and why I finally