

England look to maintain lead

AFP, Paris

Coach Fabio Capello must reg his defence as England head to Belarus for Wednesday's World Cup qualifier with John Terry and Ashley Cole both out of action while Germany have doubts over Michael Ballack in their fixture against Wales.

A second away win to follow last month's mauling of Croatia in their own backyard would give England a maximum 12 points from four games and maintain clear blue water between them and their Group Six rivals.

But with Ukraine only two points adrift, England will not be counting any chickens, not least given the enforced changes and a Wembley 5-1 win over Kazakhstan last weekend, which showed up a raft of deficiencies.

Capello is set to keep faith with Matthew Upson in the absence of back victim Terry and the West Ham man insists he can overcome the nerves he occasionally betrayed Saturday against the Kazakhs.

"It's disappointing to lose two very experienced players in John Terry and Ashley Cole for the game in Belarus," Capello admitted.

Upson, who has ten caps to date, insists he can handle the pressure against a side good enough to beat Holland last year.

"You get injuries and loss of form. It doesn't matter what someone else is doing, it is about how I am playing and I have to make sure I am ready."

"I gave 100 per cent on Saturday."

I've been learning and focusing on how we want and hopefully I can step in.

"I think we are getting better. The more time we spend together the better it will get. We are on the right track."

On the plus side for England is the likely absence of Belarus playmaker Alexander Hleb, who has been battling an ankle injury, which has hampered his adaptation to life in La Liga with Barcelona following his move from Arsenal.

Hleb is in coach Bernd Stange's squad for the match at the Dinamo Stadium in Minsk.

Belarus have so far beaten tiny Andorra but lost unluckily to Ukraine after a last-gasp Andriy Shevchenko penalty in stoppage time.

Wednesday's other action in Group Six sees Croatia, still shell-shocked after their 4-1 loss to England and five points off the pace, host Andorra.

Just as England expect to take command of their group with a midweek win so will Germany as they prepare to see off Wales in Group Four.

Germany coach Joachim Loew may have to make do without skipper Michael Ballack after he damaged a calf muscle in Saturday's 2-1 win over Russia in which the Chelsea man scored the second goal to consolidate the three-times world champions' grip on Group Four.

Ballack sat out training in Dusseldorf on Monday as a precautionary measure.

Loew, having seen the Russians who on Wednesday host Finland - close to bagging a point on Saturday, insists his men must step

up to the mark with or without Ballack.

"We watched the game against Russia again on Monday to make

FIXTURES

European zone World Cup qualifying fixtures on Wednesday (times in GMT):

- Group One**
At La Valletta (1730): Malta v Hungary
At Braga (2045): Portugal v Albania
- Group Two**
At Riga (1500): Latvia v Israel
At Piraeus (1730): Greece v Switzerland
At Luxembourg (1815): Luxembourg v Moldova
- Group Three**
At Toplice (1530): Czech Republic v Slovenia
At Bratislava (1830): Slovakia v Poland
At Belfast (1945): Northern Ireland v San Marino
- Group Four**
At Moscow (1300): Russia v Finland
At Moenchengladbach (1845): Germany v Wales
- Group Five**
At Tallinn (1730): Estonia v Turkey
At Zenica (1815): Bosnia-Herzegovina v Armenia
At Brussels (1845): Belgium v Spain
- Group Six**
At Minsk (1730): Belarus v England
At Zagreb (1815): Croatia v Andorra
- Group Seven**
At Kaunas (1500): Lithuania v Faroe Islands
At Vienna (1830): Austria v Serbia
- Group Eight**
At Tbilisi (1430): Georgia v Bulgaria
At Lecce (1850): Italy v Montenegro
At Dublin (1945): Republic of Ireland v Cyprus
- Group Nine**
At Oslo (1700): Norway v Holland
At Reykjavik (2000): Iceland v Macedonia

sure we don't sit back again in the second half. We want three more points, it wouldn't be good if we take three points from Russia, but then lose to Wales," Loew stressed, adding he expected the Welsh to be cagey and defensive.

Germany lead Group Four on seven points with two wins and a draw, while Wales are second on six points after two wins and a defeat.

Elsewhere Wednesday, world champions Italy, buoyed after taking a point in Bulgaria at the weekend, should see off Montenegro to increase their domination of Group Eight.

In the same group, the Republic of Ireland must try to pare down a three-point gap with a home win over Cyprus, who shocked them in a Euro 2008 qualifier two years ago, albeit on home turf.

European champions Spain will look for a fourth straight win in Group Five away to fellow unbeaten side Belgium while in Group Two, the match between Greece and Switzerland sees wily German veteran coaches Otto Rehhagel and Ottmar Hitzfeld - 27 trophies in Germany between them - go toe to toe.

Whereas the Greeks top the table with three wins in as many games the Swiss are still recovering from a home loss to Luxembourg.

In Group One, Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal require three points at home to Albania to lift spirits after a shock early loss to front-runners Denmark as second-placed Sweden have a night off.

France, who appear set to keep faith for now with coach Raymond Domenech despite their uncertain start in Group Seven, where Serbia travel to Austria, are also without a qualifier this week and were Tuesday filling the gap with a friendly against Tunisia.

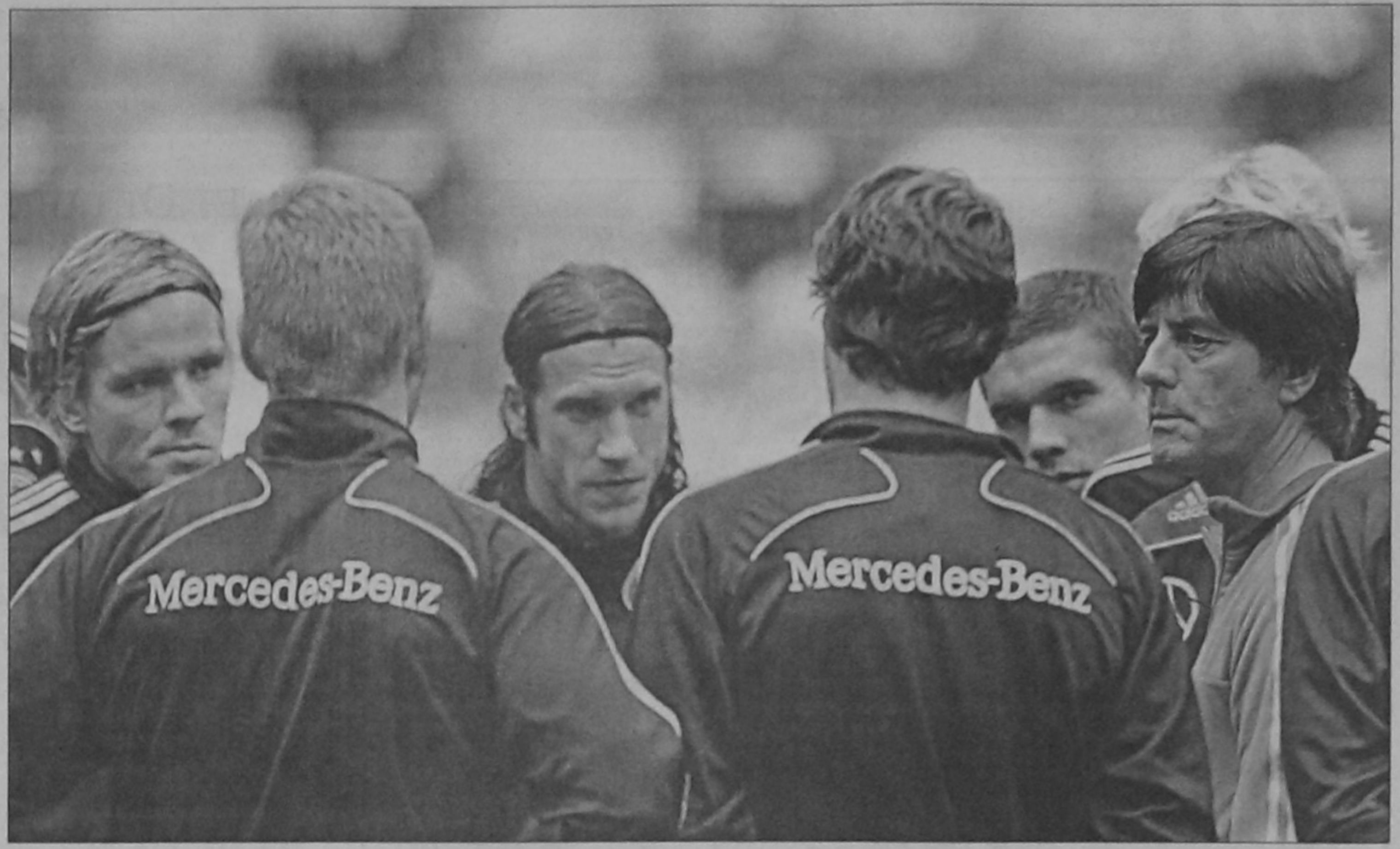


PHOTO: AFP

Germany coach Joachim Loew (R) gives instructions to his players during a training session at the LTU-Arena in Dusseldorf on Tuesday. Germany take on Wales in a 2010 World Cup qualifier tonight.

Messi rested for friendlies

AFP, Glasgow

Fans of Scotland and France will not get the chance to see Lionel Messi in upcoming friendlies against Argentina after Barcelona succeeded in their bid to have the winger rested for the two matches.

Messi had been expected to be the star attraction for Scotland's meeting with Argentina at Hampden on November 19.

But his club believe the player will be in need of rest after starting his season early to represent his country in the Olympics.

"After our negotiations with Barcelona, we have come to the conclusion we must take care of Messi," a spokesman for the Argentinian FA said.

"So that means he is excused for the friendly matches against Scotland in November and France in February. It is common sense."

Otherwise, Argentina plan to be at full strength for the friendlies.

Germany fret on Ballack

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack is an injury doubt for Wednesday night's World Cup qualifier against Wales after damaging a calf muscle, it was announced Monday.

Ballack scored Germany's second goal in their 2-1 win over Russia on Saturday in Dortmund during their Group Four qualifier, but picked up the injury to his right calf late in the game.

He informed the German Football Federation (DFB) medical staff at noon on Monday and sat out training in Dusseldorf on Monday as a precautionary measure.

"A decision on whether Ballack plays will be taken in the run-up to kick-off in Moenchengladbach, but Germany coach Joachim Loew

expects his team to pick up three more points with or without their captain.

Goals by Lukas Podolski and Ballack in Dortmund put Germany 2-0 up at half-time against Russia, but the spirited guests had Loew's side under intense pressure in the second 45 minutes and came close to an equaliser.

A Germany scout travelled to Cardiff on Saturday to watch Wales beat Liechtenstein 2-0 at the Millennium Stadium and Loew expects a defensive display from the Welsh.

"The Welshmen play differently from the Russians," said Loew. "They are a typically British team, who prevent goal opportunities by getting men behind the ball and by being pretty robust."

"They will probably play a 4-5-1 system. Loew kept experienced Werder Bremen midfielder Torsten Frings on the bench against the Russians

and hinted he may rest some players.

"Of course I can't rule out making some changes, we will look at the team in training and make a decision accordingly," said Loew.

"I was impressed with Torsten's attitude and reaction when I told him he would not be playing."

"I have a high opinion of him, he does all he can for the team and is still an important player for us."

After Kevin Kuranyi walked out of the squad during Saturday's game against Russia, Loew said he will never pick the Schalke 04 forward again.

But he still has four strikers to choose from in Miroslav Klose, Kevin Kuranyi, Lukas Podolski and Patrick Helmes.

Germany lead Group Four on seven points with two wins and a draw, while Wales are second on six points after two wins and a defeat.

Lippi to star in a film

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Marcello Lippi has volunteered to take part in an anti-racism and anti-fascism film aimed at schoolchildren, its director Moni Ovadia said Monday.

Outspoken Ovadia asked Lippi to speak about the Holocaust during the film, and revealed that the coach had been eager to participate.

"He seemed a generous man to me and he seemed perfect for the role, unpaid of course, not just for his popularity amongst young people but also for his clarity of speech," said Ovadia.

"It will be a strong message and Lippi is a star not because of what he does but because of who he is. Because of the way he speaks and the ideas he has, he can easily reach out to people's hearts and minds."

"That's what we want in order to reach out to young people with a strong message, such as an anti-fascist one."

Ovadia has yet to decide exactly what Lippi's role will be but he will likely read something from Primo Levi, a Jewish Italian Holocaust survivor.

The 2006 World Cup-winning coach will play his role alongside well-known Italian actors such as Antonio Albanese and Nicoletta Braschi.

Kaka boosts Brazil

AFP, Montevideo

The return of world player of the year Kaka has given Brazil a boost before they host Colombia in Rio de Janeiro in a South American World Cup qualifier on Wednesday.

Monday press reports raved about the star attacking midfielder who scored the first goal in Brazil's 4-0 thrashing of Venezuela on Sunday night.

The Jornal do Brasil newspaper reported: "In the return of Kaka, Brazil scored and created an atmosphere of optimism," before adding: "Kaka wore the Brazil shirt with great style."

The 26-year-old AC Milan star returned to the international scene after an absence of 11 months, scoring after just five minutes for his 23rd international goal in his 60th appearance.

The Estado de Sao Paulo newspaper however said it was delighted with the performance of Kaka but warned that Colombia's match on Wednesday would be a much tougher test.

"Kaka was everywhere with

finesse and he scored a goal," said the newspaper. "But Colombia will not be such an easy match."

Alfio Basile's Argentina travel to Santiago to play Chile on Wednesday following their 2-1 home win over Uruguay on Saturday night.

However Basile will be without star midfielder Juan Roman Riquelme as the Boca Juniors player has amassed too many yellow cards and is suspended.

The leaders of the 10-nation qualifying group Paraguay, who have 20 points from nine matches as opposed to the 16 points of both second-placed Brazil and Argentina, host Peru in Asuncion on Wednesday.

Paraguay had a 1-0 away win in Colombia on Saturday to keep up their winning momentum.

FIXTURES

- Wednesday**
At Asuncion
Paraguay v Peru
At Santiago
Chile v Argentina
At Rio de Janeiro
Brazil v Colombia
At Puerto La Cruz
Venezuela v Ecuador

UEFA punishes Atletico

AFP, Marseille

UEFA have slapped Spanish side Atletico Madrid with a stadium ban following a complaint of racism by French club Marseille.

Marseille lodged an official complaint with European football's ruling body after several of their players were targeted by Atletico fans during their match in Madrid on October 1.

Monkey chants were aimed at the French club's players, while the Marseille team bus was attacked after the match.

UEFA said Atletico must play their next two European matches, the first of which will be against Liverpool on October 22, at a stadium at least 300km away from Madrid.

A third match ban will be invoked if there is a repeat of crowd trouble or racist chanting within the next five years.

Atletico have also been fined 150,000 euros and their coach, Javier Aguirre, has been banned for both matches with Liverpool for insulting Marseille players.

Atletico have until October 17 to appeal the ban, which means they will also have to host PSV Eindhoven at a neutral ground on November 26.

Aguirre's sanction - to be applied at the neutral ground against Liverpool, then at Anfield on November 4 - means he will not be allowed at an official event during and after the match, or in the tunnel, technical area or dressing-room. Any communication with the team is also forbidden.

Becks' servants arrested over theft

AFP, London

A housekeeper who works for former England football captain David Beckham denied any wrongdoing Tuesday after a newspaper said that he and his wife were arrested on suspicion of theft.

Eric and June Emmett, who work at the LA Galaxy star's home in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire, north of London, were reportedly held last week before being released on bail.

"What is in the papers is fabricated nonsense. Totally fabricated, 99 per cent of it is totally untrue," Eric Emmett said.

The parents of Beckham's wife, former pop star Victoria, alerted police after spotting items including Beckham's boots and shirts for sale on Internet auction site eBay, the Sun newspaper reported.

Police said: "A 56-year-old man from Essex and a 55-year-old man also from Essex have been arrested in connection with this incident and are currently on police bail."

A spokesman for the couple said that since the matter was in the hands of police, he could not comment further.

And an eBay spokeswoman said the firm was working with police to establish which items were involved in the allegations.

"Anyone stupid enough to try to sell anything that is not 100 per cent legitimate makes a big mistake when they try to do it on our site," she added.

The Beckhams divide their time between their British home, a 1930s mansion nicknamed Beckingham Palace and worth around eight million pounds (10 million euros, 14 million dollars), and Los Angeles, where his football team is based.

Kanoute out for 3 weeks

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla's Mali international Frederic Kanoute, who tore his right calf against Chad in an African World Cup qualifier at the weekend, will be out of action for at least three weeks, the Spanish first division club said.

Further medical tests on Monday, follow Mali's 2-1 win over Chad on Saturday when Kanoute came off in the second half, confirmed the extent of the injury.

Kanoute's absence leaves Sevilla virtually without any strikers as Arouna Kone of Ivory Coast, Uruguayan Javier Chevanton and star Brazil striker Luis Fabiano are all out of action.

I was wrong: Kuranyi

Football

AFP, Berlin

Striker Kevin Kuranyi has explained why he walked out on Germany and admitted he was wrong to leave the team without permission during the 2-1 World Cup qualifier win over Russia.

The 26-year-old watched Saturday's game from the stands as one of two squad players not involved, but having been granted permission to meet friends at half-time, he failed to meet the team bus after the game.

Friends went to the team's hotel in Dusseldorf to collect his possessions early on Sunday morning and Germany coach Joachim Loew announced on Sunday he will not pick Kuranyi again for the Mannschaft.

"We could not tolerate Kevin's actions," said team manager Oliver Bierhoff on Tuesday.

Kuranyi now admits he was wrong and apologised to Loew on Sunday, but the coach insists there

is no way back into the national fold for the player.

"I couldn't stand it anymore," Kuranyi told German tabloid Bild on Tuesday.

"I did not participate in the 2006 World Cup, then was hardly used during Euro 2008 although I was in good form."

"I travelled to the national team last weekend having scored two goals for Schalke - and I found myself in the stands in Dortmund."

"I just wanted to get away. It is a very, very difficult situation for me, I would not wish this on anyone."

"What I did affected the team and I was wrong. I also apologised to the coach in a telephone call, there are no words of compensation."

But Kuranyi, who has made 52 appearances for Germany, said he has no regrets.

The root of the extraordinary walk-out goes back to before the 2006 World Cup when Kuranyi was dumped by then-coach Jurgen Klinsmann on the eve of the tournament.

Having won his way back and

helped Germany qualify for Euro 2008, Kuranyi was kept on the sidelines during the tournament while Mario Gomez struggled in his place.

"I stand behind what I did - I do not regret anything," he added.

"The collapse came over what happened in the past three years. I could not bear that any longer - as a player and a person."

Whether Kuranyi ever plays for Germany again remains to be seen.

"That is something for, I just need to concentrate on my performance," he added.

Schalke fans displayed a banner saying: "Kevin, we still believe in you!" when the player returned for training on Monday, but there is little sympathy here for Kuranyi's actions.

Despite the player's apology Loew says his mind is made up.

"We spoke briefly on Sunday and he apologised in principle and explained that his decision to leave the team was an error," said Loew.

"I accepted this apology, however it changes nothing over my decision."

Viduka keen on return

AFP, Brisbane

Injury-hit Newcastle United striker Mark Viduka says he still wants to help Australia reach the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, reports said here Tuesday.

The 33-year-old target man, who is here for treatment on his troublesome Achilles tendon injury, has not played club football this season and last appeared for Australia at the 2007 Asian Cup.

"Of course I want to play for Australia again - it's something that's never out of my mind," Viduka told the Daily Telegraph.

"But it's a step-by-step process and the first stage is to get back playing for my club again. I don't want to rush anything."

"I've got to be 100 per cent fit and 100 per cent sure in my mind that my heel is strong enough. When that happens I'll be back for Australia. I've always loved playing for my country."

"It's been a long process, but it's just great being back home and among the boys in Brisbane."

Australian coach Pim Verbeek said he had not spoken with Viduka during his Australian trip, but welcomed his involvement in the team camp.

"I haven't spoken to him about coming back to the national team, yes or no," Verbeek told reporters Tuesday.

"He promised me last year in April when I was in Newcastle that he wanted to be in the World Cup 2010 and I think that is why he is

here.

"For him to show interest in the Socceroos and to be back in Australia, it gives you an idea we welcome him to our training camp to get fit as soon as possible."

Viduka, who has scored 11 goals in 43 national team appearances, is accompanied on his Australian visit by Newcastle club physio James Murphy.

"Surgery was not considered

necessary," Murphy told reporters.

Murphy said he would not reveal a likely comeback date for Viduka, but the pair will return to England on Friday, having spent nearly a fortnight in Australia.

Viduka's return to the Australian team is considered crucial by his teammates.

"Hopefully, he gets fit and makes himself available again for the Aussie boys because he'd be a

massive boost for us," Everton

midfielder Tim Cahill said.

Former Glasgow Rangers defender Craig Moore, who is vying for a starting spot against Qatar following his decision to come out of international retirement, also said he wants Viduka back.

"I'm really hoping that the big fella gets his fitness sorted," Moore said. "When he (does) he'll be a very happy man."



PHOTO: AFP

Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas addresses a press conference in Brussels on Tuesday on the eve of their 2010 World Cup qualifying match against Belgium.