



Argentina coach Diego Maradona (R) talks with team captain Javier Mascherano during a training session in Glasgow on Tuesday. Maradona's first game in charge is against Scotland tonight.

'Argentina must fight to win'

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Diego Maradona, who took his first training session on Monday night since being appointed Argentina head coach, says his players must fight to win against Scotland here on Wednesday.

The 48-year-old ran the rule over his players, including Manchester United's Carlos Tevez and Liverpool's Javier Mascherano, at Celtic Park as he prepares for the international friendly.

Maradona took over from Alfio Basile as manager last month after a 1-0 loss to Chile compounded Argentina's poor start to their World Cup qualifying campaign.

The Argentine legend has limited coaching experience from over a decade ago. However the man many regard as the world's greatest ever player insists the match against Scotland will be treated as importantly as a World Cup match as he bids to get his reign off to a winning start.

"A nation like Argentina does not play friendlies," Maradona said. "We are in the middle of a World Cup campaign and Wednesday night's match must be treated in the same way."

"My players must fight from the very first minute to win the ball against Scotland. I hope to see a greater performance from the squad than the last match against Chile."

And the Argentina boss says the loss of Lionel Messi and Juan Roman Riquelme

from his squad should not detract from the task at hand. "We must not stand there with our arms crossed just because we cannot count on Riquelme nor Messi," Maradona added. "We must search for variety, options, and we have them."

"Even without them, we will play for victory against Scotland."

Wednesday night's match takes place at Hampden, a stadium which will hold special memories for Maradona, as it was where the midfield maestro scored his first international goal over 29 years ago.

The 18-year-old starred as then World Champions Argentina defeated Scotland 3-1 on June 2, 1979 where he faced a certain George Burley, now the Scotland manager.

Argentinian football as a whole is returning to its roots for the match against Scotland. Alexander Watson Hutton, widely acknowledged as the founding father of Argentinian football, was born just two miles from Hampden Park in Glasgow.

He helped found the Argentine Association Football League in 1891, South America's first proper national football association and the eighth oldest in the world.

The first Argentinian league champions were St Andrews Scotch Athletic Club, a team made up entirely of Scots, as was the team that they piped to the title, Old Caledonians.

The legacy of Scots émigrés on Argentinian football continues to this day. In the 1986 World Cup final, the scorer of the first goal in Argentina's 3-2 win against West Germany was Jose Luis

Brown, direct descendant of a Scot who set sail for Buenos Aires in 1825.

Brown is now tipped to become one of Maradona's new coaching assistants. And Carlos Javier MacAllister, whose surname and ginger-hair betray his Scottish roots, was a left-back who helped Argentina reach the 1994 World Cup finals.

Maradona also holds a special place in the hearts of the Tartan Army after his two goals helped eliminate arch-rivals England at the quarterfinal stage of the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

A member of the England team that played that day, Terry Butcher, is now the assistant manager of Scotland, and he insists he still hasn't forgiven the Argentine for his infamous "hand of God" goal in the match. "I'll never forgive him," Butcher said.

"It's not nice when you lose a World Cup quarterfinal under those circumstances. But that was 22 years ago."

Scotland's chances of causing a shock in Maradona's first game in charge were dealt a blow when manager George Burley was forced to call up two players as his squad was hit with six withdrawals.

West Bromwich Albion's James Morrison on Monday joined Craig Gordon, Darren Fletcher and strikers Kenny Miller, Ross McCormack and Steven Fletcher on the injury list.

Burley has added uncapped Dundee United midfielder Scott Robertson and Aberdeen striker Lee Miller to his squad.

Jose wants to popularise Italian game

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho on Monday said he regretted that the Italian game was perceived elsewhere as being a cagey, less entertaining affair than other European leagues.

"It may not seem so but I feel I am one of yours and I am interested in Italian football as a product," Mourinho told a coaching forum in Florence.

"I must say that abroad it is a product which people do not like (as much) which comes in behind the English Premier League and La Liga in Spain."

"In Portugal, my family has to hang on till midnight to see an Inter game whereas matches such as Getafe against Valladolid are broadcast first," he complained, adding that the Italians ought to strive harder to market themselves, particularly in Asia, where English games are shown widely.

Mourinho, who lifted a host of honours with first Porto and then Chelsea, arrived at Inter in the summer to replace the sacked Roberto Mancini, who Monday received his contemporaries' vote as coach of the season just gone for steering the northerners to the title.

Asked by Italian national coach Marcello Lippi to comment on the Italian league Mourinho said: "All championships are tough to win."

He insisted that Italian sides were very well tactically drilled meaning that "for me as a coach it's a fantastic spectacle."

Bin Hammam not yet ready

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Asian Football Confederation (AFC) chief Mohamed Bin Hammam admitted Tuesday he was ambitious but played down suggestions he could run for FIFA president.

The Qatar's reputation as a moderniser has seen him mentioned as a potential successor to the aging Sepp Blatter, 72, who has run FIFA since 1998 and whose term runs out in 2011.

Bin Hammam, a FIFA Executive Member since 1996, said it was too early to speculate what might happen in the future.

"It's a premature idea at the moment," he told AFP.

"I'm very busy in Asia at the moment and I know that Mr. Blatter is very active and is very beloved within international football."

Drogba admits charge

AFP, London

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba admitted on Monday a Football Association (FA) charge of violent conduct after throwing a coin back into the crowd at Stamford Bridge during last Wednesday's League Cup defeat against Burnley. An FA statement said a regulatory commission would hear Drogba's case on Tuesday based on video evidence and written submissions.

The incident, the subject of a police investigation, happened after the Ivory Coast striker had scored the opening goal in the fourth round tie. He also appeared to make an obscene gesture at the away fans.

Drogba, who was shown a yellow card for his actions, said after the match: "There is something I want to make clear. I tried to celebrate the goal and I received some things at me."

"The big mistake I did was to throw it back so if someone was hurt, I just want to apologise for it."

"This is not something I should show in a football match and I want to apologise. It was an incident in the heat of the moment and I regret it. It was just a mistake and nothing more."

Premier League leaders Chelsea issued a statement here Monday which said: "Didier Drogba has responded to the FA's charge of violent conduct and will not contest it."

The goal against Burnley was Drogba's first of a season where a knee injury has restricted him to just five league appearances.

Burnley, who play in English football's second-tier Championship, went on to equalise 20 minutes from time and then pulled off a shock win, 5-4 on penalties after extra-time.

Mancini keen on Real

INTERNET, undated

Former Inter Milan boss Roberto Mancini has revealed he would jump at the chance to coach Real Madrid if they decide to part ways with Bernd Schuster.

Mancini, sacked by Inter at the end of last season despite having just guided the Nerazzurri to a third successive Scudetto, is reported target of the Spanish champions.

"I wish that was true," Mancini said of the speculation. "But I know nothing. I can only hope that these rumours turn out to be true."

Madrid was knocked out of the Copa del Rey in the fourth round third division Real Union before slipping to a 1-0 league defeat at Real Valladolid at the weekend.

Schuster, who led Madrid to the Primera Liga title last season, received a vote of confidence from the club's board yesterday although he remains under immense pressure heading into this weekend's game with Recreativo Huelva.

Vieira boosts France

Football

AFP, Paris

Inter Milan midfielder Patrick Vieira is expected to make his first international appearance in nine months when France welcome Uruguay to the Stade de France for a friendly game here on Wednesday evening.

The former Arsenal man was named in France's squad for Euro 2008 but a thigh injury kept him on the sidelines for the duration of the country's dismal showing at the tournament, while a calf problem forced him to pull out of France's last World Cup qualifier against Romania on October 11.

He has since returned to fitness, though, and looks set to pull on a French jersey for the first time since the 1-0 friendly defeat to eventual Euro 2008 winners Spain on February 6.

The return of the imposing Vieira is a boost for coach Raymond Domenech, who has received public backing

from the French Football Federation despite an indifferent start to France's World Cup 2010 qualifying campaign.

Les Bleus sank to a surprise 3-1 defeat in Austria in their Group 7 opener, before beating Serbia 2-1 in Paris and fighting back from 2-0 down to claim a 2-2 draw in Romania.

Domenech has also drafted in Lyon defender Jean-Alain Boumsong after injuries robbed him of the services of three players.

"We have (Sevilla defender) Julien Escudé who is out and we have (Arsenal full-back) Bacary Sagna and (Portsmouth midfielder) Lassana Diarra who are definitely out", Domenech said in a video on the French Football Federation's website.

"We've called up Jean-Alain Boumsong. For the time being, 'Boum' replaces three players."

Arsenal centre-half Mickael Silvestre is included in the squad despite not having represented his country since the 2006 World Cup, but

Marseille winger Hatem Ben Arfa and Chelsea wide man Florent Malouda both fell victim to Domenech's rotation policy despite impressive club form.

France face a second friendly against Argentina on February 11 before their World Cup qualification campaign resumes with a double-header against Lithuania in March and April.

Uruguay are currently fifth in South America's World Cup qualification standings - a position that would earn them a play-off with the fourth-placed team from the North, Central American and Caribbean qualifying pool were they to finish there.

The two-time World Cup winners can call on the services of Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan, who was on target twice in his side's 4-1 league victory over Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday, as well as promising 21-year-olds Barcelona defender Martin Caceres and Ajax forward Luis Suarez.

Spotlight on rising stars

Football

AFP, Berlin

With both teams top of their World Cup qualifying groups, respective coaches Joachim Loew and Fabio Capello believe Wednesday night's Germany-England friendly here is a chance to put some new talent in the spotlight.

A host of big names will be missing at Berlin's Olympic Stadium, but rising stars from both countries will be given their chance to shine.

Germany are without household names Michael Ballack, Philipp Lahm and Torsten Frings, while England are shorn of Frank Lampard, Steven Gerrard, Ashley Cole, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Owen and David Beckham.

But with the goal of reaching the 2010 World Cup in South Africa burning for both sides, this is a rare chance for the coaches to see how the younger members of their squads cope with such a prestigious tie.

"You don't have to talk England up as a strong side, they are always strong, regardless of injuries," said Loew.

"They are undefeated in World Cup qualifiers and that speaks for itself."

"We are going to use this

game to experiment, as far as the friendly games are concerned we have been successful, so this is the time to try things out."

Hoffenheim's dramatic success in the Bundesliga has put them second in the table on their debut season leading to uncapped defender Marvin Compper and midfielder Tobias Weis being called up by Loew.

And Wolfsburg defender Marcel Schaefer has also been promoted.

All three were no more than fans even as recently as June's Euro 2008 and are desperate to impress.

Likewise Loew's opposite number Capello has said he will use the high-profile occasion to see how some of England's young squad cope in the limelight.

Capello has picked five players who are still eligible for Under-21 duty and could hand debuts to Aston Villa pair Gabriel Agbonlahor and Curtis Davies, plus Chelsea's 20-year-old defender Michael Macienne.

The Italian says he will risk only a maximum of two of the rookies in the game, but the absence of stars allows him to use the match to get a feel for his next generation of talent.

This will be the 31st duel between die Mannschaft and

the Three Lions with the English winning 14 matches while Germany have only ten victories.

Germany won the last encounter in London in August 2007 when Kevin Kuranyi and Christian Pander scored for Germany to seal a 2-1 victory in a friendly to unveil the new Wembley stadium.

England striker Darren Bent insists his side are under no pressure this time because of their fine start to their 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign with four wins out of four.

"Because of how the boys have done in qualifying, the pressure is off," the Tottenham striker told a news conference on Monday.

And Manchester United midfielder Michael Carrick summed up the feelings of a number of young players looking to seize their chance to shine.

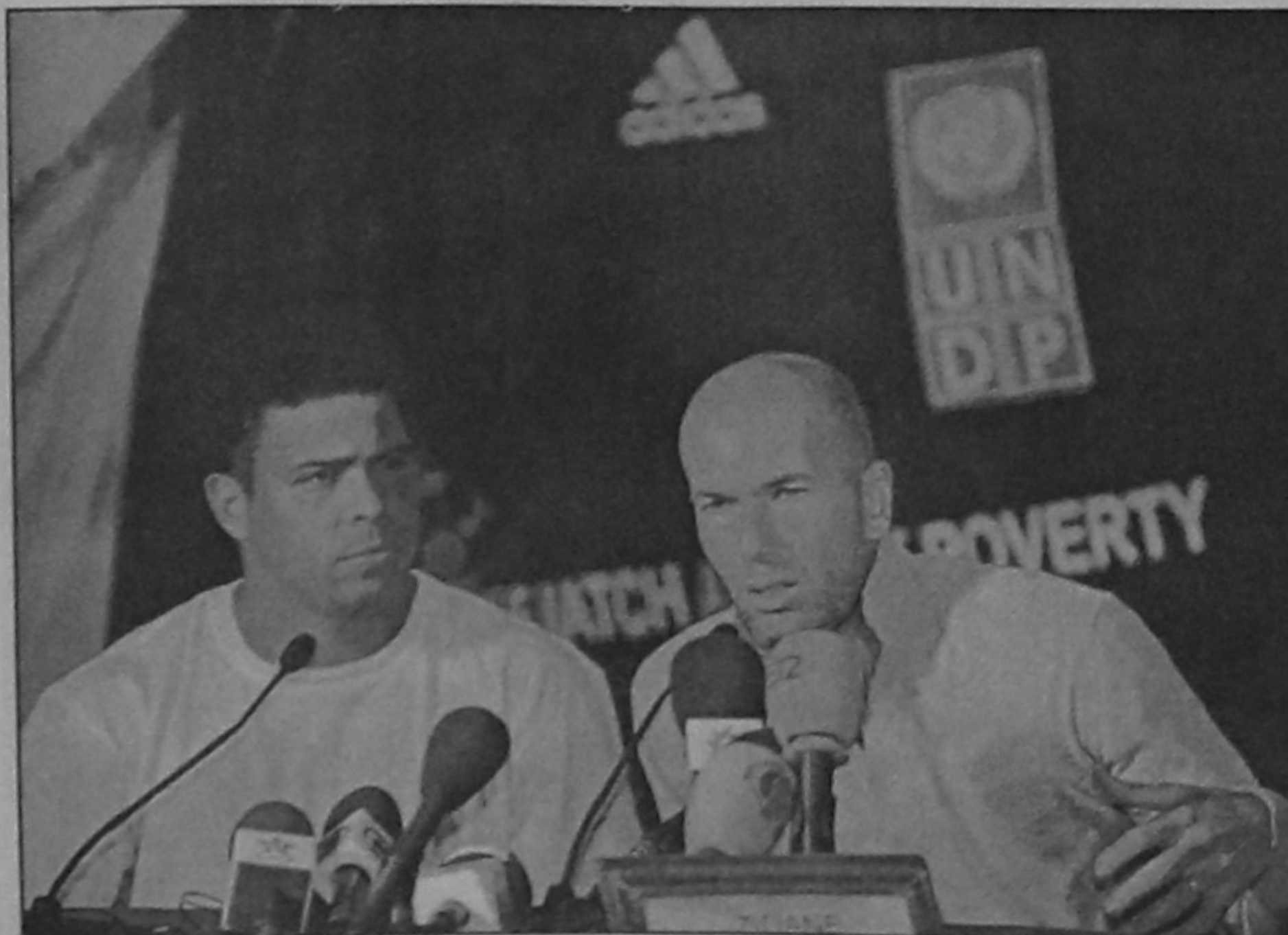
"To play for your country is a massive honour," said the 27-year-old.

It's not a meaningless friendly - Germany versus England at any level is a huge game.

"I'm desperate to be part of the England squad and desperate to play."

"As a kid, it's what you dream of."

"It wasn't the case of taking it or leaving it."



Soccer legends Zinedine Zidane (R) and Ronaldo address a press conference prior to a charity match in Fes, Morocco on Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

RUNNING THROUGH THE FOREST: France captain Patrick Vieira (C) and defender Mikael Silvestre (R) jog with teammates at the National Technical Center of Clairefontaine on Tuesday.

'Becks should end career'

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham's career should be over, England's 1966 World Cup winner Martin Peters said following the LA Galaxy midfielder's run of substitute appearances.

The captain of England's World Cup winning side at Wembley, the late Bobby Moore, has 108 caps and Beckham, who was not picked for Wednesday's friendly against Germany in Berlin, has one less at 107.

Peters feels it is time to blood other players in the 33-year-old's position.

Peters, speaking at an event organised by an England team sponsor said: "David Beckham has been great for the country

and has been a great captain - but I think it is the time to maybe look elsewhere, to the future."

Peters feels the cap has been devalued with the amount of substitutions made.

"Bobby Moore was a great friend of mine - he played 108 games and played 90 minutes every game," Peters said.

"It started with (Sven-Goran) Eriksson changing half-a-dozen players at half-time. I saw the game against Australia at West Ham; he changed the whole team - and we lost 3-1."

"There were no substitutes when I played. I think it was 1968 when they were brought in; even then Alf (Ramsey) didn't substitute that many - and we played 90 minutes more."

Peters feels there were five world-class players in the 1966 team that defeated West Germany - while the current crop

can boast only Wayne Rooney and Steven Gerrard in that bracket, with Frank Lampard possibly joining them as a contender.

The former Tottenham and West Ham midfielder has no doubts about the current coach - comparing Capello to Sir Alf Ramsey, the man who guided England to glory 42 years ago.

"In many ways they are alike, because you don't step out of line with Capello and you certainly didn't with Sir Alf - if you did you knew he'd be down on you like a ton of bricks," he said.

"Capello seems to be determined that there are no 'WAGS' around, which is brilliant because the players can just look at what they are doing on the football pitch rather than other things. He is strong and determined, just like Alf."