



Argentina star Lionel Messi (2nd from L) practice with teammates as team coach Diego Maradona (3rd from L) watches on during a training session in Ezeiza on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Gerrard wants more freedom

Football

AFP, Watford

Steven Gerrard wants England coach Fabio Capello to give him more freedom to produce the kind of match-winning heroics that have fired Liverpool back into the Premier League title race.

Gerrard's dynamic displays have hauled the Reds to within one point of leaders Manchester United and also helped humiliate Real Madrid in the Champions League.

The Liverpool captain hit a hat-trick against Aston Villa on Sunday to cap a superb run of form that has seen the midfielder come into his own in a more advanced position just behind Spanish striker Fernando Torres.

After two seasons being used in a variety of ways by Kop boss Rafa Benitez, who found it hard to tame the sometimes tactically undisciplined star, Gerrard is thriving in his new role and is hopeful Capello has taken note ahead of Saturday's friendly against Slovakia at Wembley.

"I've never been happier than I am now in my career," Gerrard said. "I played a couple of years on the right when Rafa first came to Liverpool. I had a little moan and a little complain that I was there every week."

"Now I've got two holding midfielders behind me doing an awful lot of running

for me and freeing it up for me. And I feel that's when you get the best out of myself, when I'm free to run at defenders and cause danger in the attacking third.

"Rafa's certainly helping me to improve in this position. I'm getting my head around it and really enjoying the freedom of playing in there."

"If I was picked to play there (for England) I would be really happy. I've played there all season for Liverpool. I think it would help me."

"I'd love nothing better than to be given the chance in that role to try to find that form."

"But that's the manager's decision. Fabio has to make that decision."

Gerrard's belief that he can be an influential figure for England in a central position has not yet been shared by Capello, who played the 29-year-old on the left-wing in his last international appearances against Kazakhstan and Belarus earlier this season.

Capello has so far used Emile Heskey alongside Wayne Rooney in his forward line but, even though he would prefer a central role, Gerrard is adamant he is mature enough to make a positive impact from the flanks.

Although he was never shy of complaining about his role on the right wing for Liverpool in the past, now Gerrard insists he is aware enough to prove useful in any position.

"Maybe when I was younger I was a bit selfish and thinking of myself a bit too

much when Rafa was playing me out of position," he said.

"My relationship with Fabio since he came in has been really good. I've had dialogue with him all the time about how to get the best out of me."

"I think my form can be similar to my club. I think since he came in my form has improved for England."

"It's slightly different because I'm obviously a little bit more out on the left. But the manager has explained that he doesn't want me to be an out and out left winger."

"He does want me to go places where I can cause defenders problems. That's what I want to hear."

A victory in Wednesday's World Cup qualifier against Ukraine will go a long way towards securing England's place in next year's finals and Gerrard insists his determination to succeed with Liverpool is no stronger than his desire for international glory.

"I'm desperate to win something with England. When we've been knocked out of tournaments the hurt and the pain is exactly the same as when you don't achieve something with your club," he said.

"I have many more ambitions left for club and country. Everyone knows the talents there."

"It's nice to be top of the group but the challenge now is to get qualification sorted and then go into the tournament full of confidence."

Ancelotti hits back at Mourinho

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan manager Carlo Ancelotti has hit back at Inter Milan's Jose Mourinho after his jab at Serie A coaches.

Mourinho angered a number of managers at the weekend, claiming that some aren't allowed to pick their starting 11.

Head of the Italian Coaches Association Renzo Ulivieri has since demanded an apology from the "Special One".

"I agree with Ulivieri - our coaches are respected in Italy and abroad," Ancelotti told Corriere dello Sport.

"I don't understand why Mourinho always takes aim at Milan, but at this stage I don't even care."

"Is it a planned strategy? I don't know what he hopes to get from this or what he is trying to achieve."

"If Inter win the Scudetto then they will have deserved it. They know how to get the best out of their players and they are very strong physically."

"But I think that (Roberto) Mancini's side was identical, only they tried to play the ball to feet. Now Inter are just very clinical."

Terry ready to serve the army

AFP, London

England captain John Terry has revealed he is envious of the soldiers who serve in the British Army and would love to serve alongside them.

The Chelsea captain - who is preparing for the friendly against Slovakia and then the crucial 2010 World Cup qualifier against Ukraine next week - was speaking after the squad had trained under the watchful gaze of several members of the Armed Forces.

"They (the armed forces) love their football," 28-year-old Terry told the Daily Telegraph.

"They like to look up to us but I would like to be in their shoes and do what they do."

"They are brilliant at their job."

"I would love to (serve) of course. Put your life on the line for the country - I would love to, but I don't think many of us could."

Several of those who watched the England squad go through their paces had just returned from a tour of duty in Afghanistan and clearly their experiences left an indelible impression on the players.

"I was shocked, I didn't expect that," said England football icon David Beckham, after Ben McBean who lost an arm and a leg in Afghanistan asked the former skipper to sign his fake arm.

Terry's central defence partner Rio Ferdinand summed up the squad's feelings.

"They are heroes," said the Manchester United star.

"For us to be able to share the same room is a privilege."

Robinho livid at Pele

Football

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazilian international Robinho is threatening to sue footballing legend Pele over claims made by him that he had taken recreational drugs.

Pele, a three-time World Cup winner and regarded as probably the finest footballer ever, has been quoted by several Brazilian papers as claiming that drugtaking was not as rife in football as was alleged but it was a shame that players such as Robinho and fellow Brazilian Ronaldo had resorted to them.

However, Robinho, whose form has dipped markedly for Manchester City in the past few matches reaching its nadir last weekend when he missed a penalty against Sunderland, issued a statement on his website decrying 68-year-old Pele's comments.

"I am disappointed by Pele's remarks and if he does not withdraw them then I will take him to court where he will have to answer for claims that are totally without foundation," said

Robinho, who left Real Madrid for City in a stunning 34.2million pound move last summer.

According to the press reports Pele had tried to play down the claims that drugtaking was commonplace amongst footballers.

"Many in the press talk about drugtaking in football," he was quoted as saying.

"It would be unfair, when it is just one or two cases like those of Robinho and Ronaldo to generalise," added Pele, who is alleged to have made his claims during a court case which involves his son Edinho, who has admitted he has a cocaine addiction.

Other Brazilian media claimed that Pele had not made those remarks surrounding drugtaking but in fact had been referring to Ronaldo's habit of enjoying the nightlife and an allegation of serious sexual assault levelled at Robinho in late January.

Brazil coach Dunga, though, tried to play down the whole affair, as his squad prepares for two 2010 World Cup qualifiers against Ecuador and Peru, by saying that Pele's remarks had been misinterpreted.

Jose looks to future

Football

AFP, Rome

Jose Mourinho has told Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti that he needs to get rid of several players if he is to guide the team to their first Champions League crown since 1965.

Speaking to Wednesday's Gazzetta dello Sport, Mourinho listed a number of demands in order to bring continental success to a club that has often disappointed on the European stage.

Despite winning the last three Serie A titles and leading the current championship by seven points, Inter consistently fail in Europe. They have not reached the final of Europe's premier club competition since 1972 and have only once reached the semifinals, in 2002-03, since the Champions League expanded in 1997-98 to allow non domestic title-holders into the competition - in fact their previous last four appearances had been in 1980-81.

But Mourinho believes he has the answers to the Inter conundrum, amongst them developing young players, reducing the squad size and improving their training facilities.

But Mourinho doesn't want any short term signings.

"With four more over 30s I wouldn't stay here but with four top players I would accept the challenge," said the former Chelsea boss.

"For sure I don't want to work with 29 players any more hence we also have to sell players."

That could mean a lot of departures in the summer as Mourinho wants to develop young players such as his teenage pair Mario Balotelli and Davide Santon, both currently cementing regular places in the starting line up.

But Mourinho also wants his training facilities to be revamped.

"First things first Inter needs to improve the level of its working conditions," said Mourinho.

"Starting with Pinetina (the training complex) where we have to change not only the training pitch but also the structure to allow our players to give their best."



German players (L to R) Mario Gomez, captain Michael Ballack and Marcell Jansen stretch during a training session in Leipzig on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

'Ballack must lead from the front'

Football

AFP, Berlin

Michael Ballack must lead Germany by example as the national team look to bounce back from home defeats in their last two games, insisted German Football Federation (DFB) boss Theo Zwanziger on Wednesday.

Germany face minnows Liechtenstein in a World Cup qualifier on Saturday in Leipzig, but after home defeats by Norway and England in their last two games, Chelsea star Ballack must lead his team to a comfortable victory, says DFB boss Zwanziger.

"Ballack must lead from the front," DFB president Zwanziger told German magazine Sport Bild.

Ballack landed himself in hot water with the DFB last October for accusing Germany coach Joachim Loew of not showing his senior players enough respect and loyalty.

The Germany captain apologised two weeks later, but neither Ballack nor Loew came out of the episode with any credit.

With Germany top of their qualifying group and unbeaten after four games, they need two big wins in their qualifiers in Leipzig this Saturday and Cardiff on April 1 against Wales to boost flagging confidence.

"If the team plays well against Liechtenstein and Wales and delivers the six points, I expect issues which have been discussed in the past

will quickly become a topic no more," said Zwanziger, referring to last year's public spat between Ballack and Loew.

And it seems Ballack has been working hard behind the scenes to build bridges in the Germany squad.

"We notice in discussions and conversations Michael has changed and we can see a completely positive attitude from him in the team environment," said Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff.

Bierhoff and Ballack had an on field spat immediately after the Euro 2008 final 1-0 defeat to Spain in Vienna last June, but Bierhoff has defended Ballack from recent criticism within the Germany squad.

Injured Bayern Munich striker Miroslav Klose, who has captained Germany on occasions, said Ballack must work hard to lead both on and off the field and Bierhoff took exception to Klose's comments.

"These comments were senseless, because they do not bring anything to help the team and the timing was unfortunate so close to the game," said Bierhoff.

With ten years experience of international football behind him, Ballack has said he will work with new members of the squad, but Germany need a big win over Liechtenstein - ranked 151 in the world - to boost confidence.

"It doesn't matter if we are playing Liechtenstein or Wales, the opposition is not important, we just have to win both games and get the points," said striker Lukas Podolski defiantly.

Friedel's red card rescinded

AFP, London

Aston Villa goalkeeper Brad Friedel had the red card he received during Sunday's 5-0 thrashing by Liverpool overturned by the Football Association here on Tuesday.

Friedel was sent-off by referee Martin Atkinson in the 63rd minute at Anfield for bringing down Liverpool striker Fernando Torres inside the area.

But Villa's successful appeal means the United States international will be available for their Premier League clash away to leaders Manchester United on April 5.

Martin O'Neill's side have seen their bid to claim one of the four qualifying places on offer to English clubs for next season's Champions League falter in recent weeks.

They are currently fifth in the table, three points behind fourth-placed Arsenal.

Mata replaces Iniesta

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Vicente Del Bosque on Tuesday replaced Barcelona's injured Andres Iniesta with uncapped Valencia winger Juan Mata for World Cup qualifiers against Turkey at home on Saturday and away four days later.

Iniesta injured his thigh on Sunday during Barcelona's 6-0 thrashing of Malaga in a Spanish league match and is expected to be sidelined for two weeks.

Mata has been a regular fixture at Valencia since he joined the club from Real Madrid's youth team in 2007.

Del Bosque included the 20-year-old in his squad for Spain's 3-0 friendly victory against Chile in November last year but the winger did not feature in the match.

Recession hitting Asian sports

AFP, Hong Kong

As the global economic turmoil batters the world's biggest banks and financial institutions, concerns are growing that the Asian sporting events they support could be bundled into touch.

This weekend, Hong Kong hosts its annual Rugby Sevens tournament, traditionally an excuse for the region's high-flying financiers to jet into the southern Chinese city, dress up in costume and overindulge on hospitality.

But as financial giants take their begging bowls to governments, such corporate largesse is decidedly out of favour.

"Activity around this year's rugby sevens will be a fraction of what we did last year in recognition of the very different market environment we now operate in," said a spokeswoman for Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS).

RBS, long a stalwart supporter of rugby, has received more than 29 billion US dollars in bailouts from the British government.

Other major firms have either sublet their boxes - which can each cost around 80,000 US dollars a year - or scaled back the party, according to organisers and reports.

This reduction in corporate entertainment reflects the wider recession-driven belt-tightening, where any non-business spending comes under careful scrutiny, including sponsorship of sports events.

"You will find that events will no longer be supported simply because they happen to have been the favourite pastime of the chief executive," said Hass Aminian, a director of business development at global sports marketing firm Sport Five.

"The deals will have to be run on even more strict business models," he said, adding that fewer deals had been agreed in recent months.

The Asian sports marketing industry has boomed in the past 10 years, in particular since the success of the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan.

It has provided a crucial mechanism for global firms to raise their profile in the region and for regional firms to let the world know about their products.

Aminian said it was very difficult to quantify the entire Asian sports marketing sector, but its importance can be demonstrated by last year's Beijing Olympics, which attracted 866 million dollars from its 12 leading sponsors.

However, the sports that have benefited from the aggressive increase in activity are now having to scramble for support.