



Italy defender Andrea Dossena (C) challenges striker Vincenzo Iaquinta (L) during a training session at the national technical center of Coverciano on Friday.

Bayern will fight to keep Ribery

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich are preparing for a "brutal fight" to stop playmaker Franck Ribery falling into the clutches of would-be suitors like super-rich Manchester City.

Reports in England this week suggested Premier League side City were planning to swoop for Ribery and his fellow Frenchman, Barcelona striker Thierry Henry, at the end of the season.

Other clubs likely to be interested in Ribery's services are Barcelona, Real Madrid and possibly Chelsea.

But Bayern warned Friday that they were not about to let their prize jewel go without a struggle.

"Our aim is to do everything to hold on to Franck," Bayern general manager Uli Hoeness told Friday's edition of Bild. "But it's going to be a brutal fight, there are some clubs who are going to table offers."

"The most important thing is to show that we know what we want and that we indicate that we want to keep him because if there's the slightest doubt his agents will try their chance."

Hoeness added: "Franck and his family feel very comfortable with us here, but it's obvious that his agents are potentially interested in a transfer."

He went on to identify one factor that could trigger Ribery's exit from Jurgen Klinsmann's side, namely a lack of what he termed "perspective" in the quest for a European title.

"But I don't see any case of that at Bayern," ahead of Bayern's Champions League quarterfinal clash with Barcelona.

With money seemingly no object for City's new Middle Eastern owners Hoeness concluded the interview by suggesting there was no sum which might tempt Bayern enough to contemplate losing one of their best players.

Wright-Phillips doubtful

AFP, London

England winger Shaun Wright-Phillips looks set to miss Saturday's friendly against Slovakia after once again sitting out training on Friday.

Wright-Phillips has been unable to train with Fabio Capello's squad all week because of an ankle problem and the Manchester City star is unlikely to recover in time for the Wembley warm-up for Wednesday's World Cup qualifier against Ukraine.

With Wright-Phillips sidelined, Capello will start with either David Beckham or Tottenham's Aaron Lennon on the right wing.

Beckham will break Bobby Moore's outfield appearance record for England if he wins his 109th cap against the Slovaks.

Portsmouth striker Peter Crouch was able to join in with his teammates at their London Colney base on Friday after missing training earlier in the week because of a calf injury suffered during his club's victory over Everton last Saturday.

Iaquinta to lead attack

AFP, Podgorica



Italy coach Marcello Lippi will ask Juventus striker Vincenzo Iaquinta to feast on Group Eight minnows Montenegro on Saturday as the world champions look to take another step closer to the 2010 World Cup finals.

Iaquinta is likely to start up front with Udinese pair Fabio Quagliarella and Antonio Di Natale flanking him in a 4-3-3 formation with Italy missing the injured Luca Toni and Alberto Gilardino.

Lippi's selection has caused a stir as he continues to ignore the sensational form of 'enfant terrible' Antonio Cassano who has had an excellent season but has struggled to keep his temperament in check.

Iaquinta, in recent goal-scoring form at Juventus, is likely to lead the line and the 29-year-old insists he is not simply a replacement for the injured duo of Toni and Gilardino.

"If I'm in shape I don't feel inferior to anyone. I'm going through a purple patch at the moment," he said.

"I'm playing consistently, I've no physical problems. Now I want to do well for the national team."

Italy have three wins and a draw from their first

four group games and top the pool narrowly on goal difference from the Republic of Ireland.

Those two meet in Bari on Wednesday in a match that could go some way to deciding who wins the group and takes the automatic qualifying spot for South Africa.

In the meantime, Lippi is understood to have made a couple of surprise choices, such as Sampdoria midfielder Angelo Palombo alongside AC Milan's Andrea Pirlo and Daniele De Rossi of AS Roma in the middle of the park.

European football's newest members Montenegro know they face an uphill task against the world champions.

Montenegro will be without their star player as striker Mirko Vucinic, who plies his trade in Italy with AS Roma, is suspended.

The former Yugoslav republic, yet to win an official match, are under no illusions as to just how tough the challenge awaiting them is but they insist they won't be overawed by their illustrious opponents, particularly after only going down narrowly 2-1 in Lecce last year.

"Fear of Italy? No way, even if they are world champions, in Montenegro there's a lot of optimism," said team spokesman Ivan Radovic.

"After the performance in Lecce everyone is dreaming of a victory. It's a match in which we have nothing to lose. Of course the absence of Vucinic will hit us hard. Other than being our captain he's also our best forward."

Beckham can act as Rooney's minder

AFP, London



David Beckham is ready to act as Wayne Rooney's minder to keep the fiery England forward out of trouble.

England coach Fabio Capello called Rooney a "crazy man" following the Manchester United star's petulant red card for throwing the ball at the referee against Fulham last weekend.

Capello's joke hid concern that a lack of individual discipline could damage England's hopes of a successful World Cup campaign in South Africa next year.

Rooney has often struggled to control his temper with England and was sent off for stamping on Ricardo Carvalho in the 2006 quarterfinal defeat against Portugal. He was also substituted by Sven Goran Eriksson after losing his rag in a friendly against Spain in 2004.

Beckham knows from personal experience how the red mist can descend quickly on the pitch following his costly red card for kicking

Diego Simeone in the 2002 World Cup defeat to Argentina.

The on-loan AC Milan midfielder is a more mature figure now but he knows it is essential that Rooney retains his fire or he will become a less dynamic player.

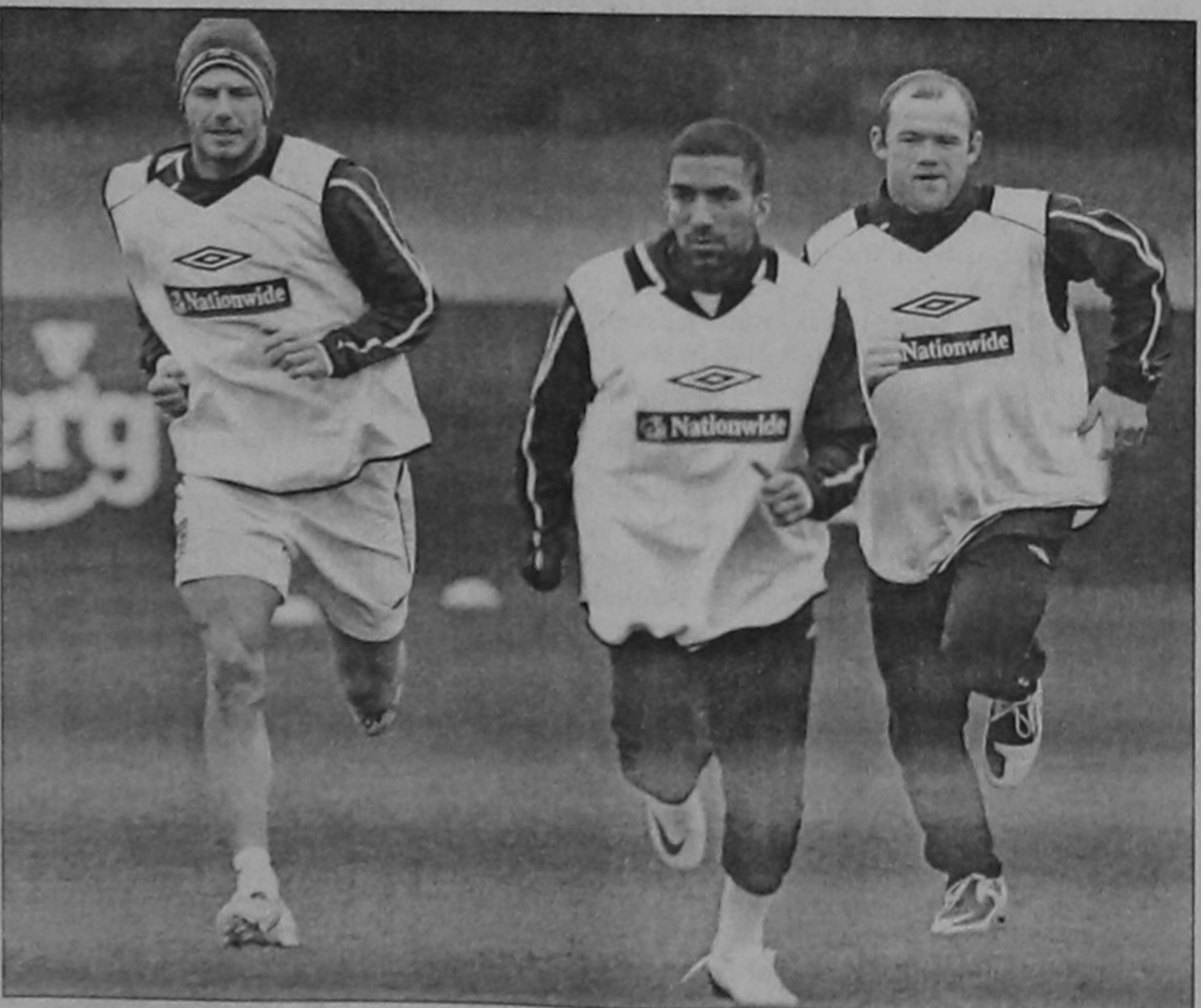
Beckham believes it is impossible to completely tame Rooney but he is keen to keep an eye on Rooney so he can avoid the kind of explosions that could lead to more disciplinary problems.

"If you take that side of him out of his game he becomes a different player and a different animal," Beckham said.

"There's no way you want to take that out of him. He knows it's not right."

"It's happened a few times with myself. I probably still haven't been able to control it fully. When things go badly, the team's losing and it's not going well, that frustration comes out."

"I was frustrated in the Spain game and got a yellow card for talking back to the ref. You try to control it, but sometimes you can't."



England players David Beckham (L), Aaron Lennon (C) and Wayne Rooney sprint during a training session in London Colney on Friday.

EUROPEAN FIXTURES

AFP, Paris

European 2010 World Cup qualifying fixtures on Saturday:

Group One

Malta v Denmark, Albania v Hungary, Portugal v Sweden

Group Two

Luxembourg v Latvia, Moldova v Switzerland, Israel v Greece

Group Three

Northern Ireland v Poland, Slovenia v Czech Republic

Group Four

Russia v Azerbaijan, Wales v Finland, Germany v Liechtenstein

Group Five

Armenia v Estonia, Belgium v Bosnia, Spain v Turkey

Group Seven

Romania v Serbia, Lithuania v France

Group Eight

Cyprus v Georgia, Montenegro v Italy, Republic of Ireland v Bulgaria

Group Nine

Holland v Scotland

Ancelotti staying at Milan

AFP, Rome

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti will almost certainly be staying at the club according to vice-president Adriano Galliani.

Speculation in the Italian press has long linked Ancelotti with a move to Spanish giants Real Madrid but Galliani said that would not happen.

However, he said Milan would wait until they knew for sure which European competition they were playing in next season before beginning their summer shopping.

"It's 99.99 per cent certain he will stay. All transfer dealings will begin the day when we know exactly what competition we'll be in," said Galliani.

"I think and I hope it will be the Champions League. As for Ancelotti and Real I'm not worried."

"He has a contract (until the end of next season) and then (Real president) Florentino Perez keeps telling me he's a friend, he would never do this without telling me."

"All this attention shows that he's a coach in demand and we were clever in signing him."

Deco almost certain to play

AFP, Lisbon

Deco is virtually certain to play for Portugal in their World Cup qualifier against Sweden on Saturday, just two weeks after his club Chelsea hinted that the midfielder's season could be over.

Portugal coach Carlos Queiroz said on Thursday: "We are 90 per cent confident that Deco will play in the match (in Porto)."

The 30-year-old Deco suffered a thigh injury playing against Manchester City in the English Premier League on March 15 with the setback judged so serious that Chelsea coach Guus Hiddink thought the star would be sidelined until next season.

Portugal and Sweden have suffered stuttering starts to their World Cup campaigns. Portugal are fourth in Group One while the Swedes are a place further back.

Schalke sack Ruten

INTERNET, undated

Schalke continued the search for a general manager Friday and added a coach to the shopping list following the dismissal of Fred Ruten as a dismal season reached its nadir.

Then, as now, former players Mike Bueskens and Youri Mulder - assisted by former goalkeeper Oliver Reck - will take over as caretaker coaches until a new appointment.

"The chaos continues," Germany's Bild newspaper said. "A cult club as circus act," broadcaster ZDF wrote on its website - and there were similar comments elsewhere in the German media.

The axe on the 46-year-old coach fell Thursday evening after a meeting with supervisory board chairman Josef Schmusenberg, which the club described as "very practical and also at times emotional."

"I am sorry it has to end like this," Ruten said.

"Schalke are a great club with huge potential and great fans all across the country who live for this team."

Schalke began the season with high hopes of challenging for the Bundesliga but they look further away than ever from winning their first league title for more than 40 years.

Maradona set for competitive debut

AFP, Montevideo



Diego Maradona is poised for a record-breaking competitive bow as

Argentina coach when he leads the double world champions into their latest World Cup qualifier against Venezuela on Saturday.

The legendary player, who has overseen two friendly wins over Scotland and France since taking charge last year, is in such demand that the Estadio Monumental venue, where ticket prices have rocketed 60 per cent in a year, could be bursting at the seams.

Over 19,000 tickets, with a minimum price of 60 pesos (16.30 US dollars; 12.10 euros) were snapped up on Thursday, generating 2.5 million pesos. Around four million pesos will be spent on tickets for the game, a new record for the stadium.

Argentina, who will also face Bolivia in La Paz next week, are currently third in the South American qualifying zone with 16 points, seven behind leaders Paraguay and just one behind bitter rivals Brazil.

Maradona succeeded Alfio Basile who resigned after a World Cup qualifying defeat to

Chile last time out, won praise for his tactics in a 2-0 win over France in Marseille.

His build-up to Saturday's clash has not been helped by veteran playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme saying he will never turn out for a Maradona-coached Argentina side.

However, Maradona has a luxury of youth and experience to call upon from Javier Zanetti, with over 120 caps, to Barcelona star Lionel Messi and Atletico Madrid's Sergio Aguero whose links to the coach are very close - his girlfriend is Maradona's daughter.

A month ago, Aguero and Giannina presented the 48-year-old Maradona with his first grandchild.

"Becoming a grandfather has revitalized me," said the

FIXTURES	
Saturday	At Montevideo (2000GMT)
	Uruguay v Paraguay
	At Buenos Aires (2210GMT)
	Argentina v Venezuela
Sunday	At Bogota (0020GMT)
	Colombia v Bolivia
	At Quito (2200GMT)
	Ecuador v Brazil
Monday (0110GMT)	At Lima
	Peru v Chile



Brazil strikers Robinho (R) and Luis Fabiano practice during a training session in Teresopolis on Thursday.

Ballack wants dominance

AFP, Berlin



Germany captain Michael Ballack wants a solid win as much as a goal

bonanza on Saturday when his side tackle European minnows Liechtenstein in a World Cup qualifier following back-to-back home defeats.

Defeats to Norway in February and England last November have dented the team's confidence and the national team needs a convincing win over tiny Liechtenstein which is 151st in FIFA's world rankings.

The principality is just 160 square kilometres and the national team is largely made up of part-time footballers.

Germany top Group 4 by four points from rivals Russia and need three points from Leipzig's Zentralstadion, as well as next Wednesday against Wales in Cardiff, to stay on top especially with October's trip to Moscow in mind.

But Ballack says Germany must start asserting themselves against opponents with an eye on the World Cup in June next year - starting with Liechtenstein.

"We are lacking in dominance," said Chelsea

midfielder Ballack, who captained Germany to their 1-0 defeat by Norway in February.

"And recently results have also not been good, that is something we have to change."

"This has a lot to do with physical condition, but also with quality."

"We are in a phase where we don't put teams under enough pressure."

Ballack believes Germany will qualify for South Africa, but says the team needs to use games like these to make sure they can step up to the challenges they will face from the world's top teams in the republic.

"We will qualify for the World Cup and we will go past the group stage even if it gets tight. But then come the matches against the big teams. We must now set the foundations so that at the World Cup we can win the so-called life or death matches."

"This is what I am trying to point out as the captain."

And Liechtenstein should present no problem to Germany who have won all three of their previous meetings, scored 23 goals compared to their opponents' three and it was 6-0 to the Germans when the teams last met in September.

With Bayern Munich veteran striker Miroslav Klose out

coach. Manchester United striker Carlos Tevez is also enjoying the new regime.

"You get goose-bumps every time Diego talks to you. We're very happy with the national team set-up and I'm sure Argentina are going to do very well," said Tevez.

Brazil travel to Ecuador on Sunday with their build-up rocked by an increasingly bitter and public war of words between Robinho and Pele over drugs allegations.

Coach Dunga had been under fire after Brazil played out three uninspiring 0-0 draws at home before recapturing their form of old with a 6-2 friendly victory over Portugal and a 2-0 win against world champions Italy in London.

"We enjoy playing the way we did in these friendlies. And when we do that we're tough to beat," said Robinho.

Leaders Paraguay have won seven and drawn two of their qualifiers.

With the top four sides assured of places in the finals, they have one step in South Africa.

Paraguay travel to Uruguay on Saturday.

"We've already made important strides but we've still got the final step to take," said coach Gerardo Martino.

with an ankle injury. Stuttgart's Mario Gomez will partner Bayern's Lukas Podolski up front with a flurry of goals expected from the home side.

At the other end, goalkeeper Rene Alder is out with an elbow injury and Hanover's Robert Enke will take his place in the Germany goal for the first time since damaging his hand last autumn.

Enke, 31, could certainly do with keeping a blank sheet as his club Hanover are sliding down the Bundesliga table.

A broken hand kept him out from October until the Bundesliga's late January restart after the winter break and he has conceded 31 goals in 15 league games - 11 in seven matches before he broke his hand and 20 in the eight since his return.

But with Liechtenstein yet to score a goal after three qualifying games and having conceded eight - their single point so far came from a 0-0 draw with Azerbaijan in Baku last year - Germany should have few problems.

And as Ballack said ominously in light of their defeats to Norway and England, Germany "simply have to play better and put in a better performance."

"And it will happen," he added.