

England close in

AFP, Paris

England can all but book their World Cup finals tickets on Saturday if they can take full points at Kazakhstan in Almaty.

After the humiliation of missing out altogether on Euro 2008, on the back of yet another unfulfilled dream at the World Cup two years earlier in Germany, pride has been restored even if it took an Italian, Fabio Capello, to do it.

Five wins in as many games have the 1966 champions cantering in Group Six with a five-point cushion over a second-placed Croatia side they have already thumped away from home while third-placed Ukraine lag another three points further behind.

With little Andorra arriving at Wembley next week, six points from the two games would see England home and dry.

Yet Almaty represents a trip into the unknown and with Croatia expecting to close the gap by seeing off the Ukrainians at home, England now need to close the door with only the group winners guaranteed to go through.

Liverpool star Steven Gerrard says with Capello at their backs England are mentally ready for the task ahead against a side they beat 5-1 at Wembley, albeit after a sluggish opening.

"We need to approach them with the right attitude and get the job done,"

Gerrard warned.

"If we win these two games, we will be three points away from qualification with three games to play and that puts us basically in the driving seat," Gerrard told FA.Com.

International teammate Frank Lampard said England had been reassessing the Wembley meeting, conceding that "we were not at our best" on that occasion.

Even at the end of a long campaign which culminated in him landing the FA Cup with Chelsea Lampard said he was itching for action.

"Everyone is fit and fresh and, whether they have lost or won cup finals with their club teams, they are very focused."

England are without first-choice goalkeeper David James, who has undergone shoulder surgery - Robert Green is set to deputise - and Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand, who has a calf problem, meaning a chance for Everton's Joleon Lescott or West Ham's Matthew Upson to impress alongside John Terry.

As England race onwards towards the finals their recent nemesis, Portugal, can only wish they were in their shoes.

The Portuguese, who ended English hopes at Euro 2004 and then in Germany two years later, have had a near disastrous campaign under former Manchester United assistant Carlos Queiroz and will be on the verge of elimination if they lose Saturday in Albania. One win in five games means Cristiano Ronaldo and company stand third, seven points behind Denmark and a

resurgent Hungary.

With a trip to the Danes, who beat them in Lisbon, to come Portugal are at crisis point after three straight goalless draws - including one at home to the Albanians.

"We have confidence in abundance," Queiroz told reporters on Thursday.

"Mentally, physically, technically, we are fine. (But) there will have to be more intensity, quality and rhythm."

With Sweden level on points and with a game in hand on his men ahead of their home match with the Danes on Saturday, Queiroz concluded that "we can't guarantee the result - but we do guarantee 90 minutes of quality football and hard work."

Portugal's Valencia star Miguel insisted that although "we are struggling to gel as a team and have been a bit short on luck we have it in us to win the five games that can take us through."

World champions Italy, European champions Spain,

FIXTURES

(All times GMT):

Saturday
Albania v Portugal 19:45, Sweden v Denmark 18:00, Slovakia v San Marino 15:30, Azerbaijan v Wales 15:00, Finland v Liechtenstein 16:00, Kazakhstan v England 15:00, Croatia v Ukraine 18:15, Belarus v Andorra 16:00, Lithuania v Romania 18:00, Serbia v Austria 18:30, Bulgaria v Republic of Ireland 17:30, Cyprus v Montenegro 18:30, FYR Macedonia v Norway 15:45, Iceland v Holland 18:45

France and Germany also have a break as their rivals slug it out.

Spain have maximum points in Group Five, while the unbeaten Italians sit atop Group Eight, meaning the pressure Saturday is all on the Republic of Ireland, who could go top by a single point if they end the challenge of Bulgaria away.

"It is the last game of the season for us and probably one of the biggest we have ever had," said Ireland's Manchester City defender Richard Dunne.

Germany are sitting pretty top of Group Four with Guus Hiddink's Russia four points behind albeit with a game more to play.

As both sides sit it out for now, Finland will attempt to draw to within two points of Russia by defeating minnows Liechtenstein while also-rans Azerbaijan and Wales meet in Baku.

France will meanwhile be keen observers as Group Seven leaders Serbia, whom the French must still play away, seek to build on a two-point advantage at home to Austria.

Lithuania, trailing the French by a point having played a game more, can leapfrog Les Bleus into second place if they win at home to struggling Romania.

Group Nine is all but settled with Holland having won all five games so far ahead of a trip to Iceland.

If Iceland can pull off a shock win they would go level on points with Scotland, without a game this week, in the battle for an unlikely play-off berth.

Galatasaray appoint Rijkaard

AFP, Istanbul

Dutchman Frank Rijkaard was on Friday named as new coach of Turkish first division club Galatasaray.

The 47-year-old former Dutch international and Barcelona coach will replace Bulent Korkmaz, who resigned on Tuesday.

Rijkaard, who won two Spanish crowns (2005, 2006) and the European Champions' League in 2006 with Barcelona, has been without a club since leaving the Catalan club at the end of the 2008 season after five years at the helm.

Rijkaard enjoyed a sparkling career as a player, representing Ajax, Real Zaragoza and Milan, and winning 73 caps for the Netherlands, scoring 10 goals.

He coached the Dutch national side from 1998-2000 and Sparta Rotterdam before joining Barca.

Iniesta out of Confed Cup

INTERNET, undated

Andres Iniesta has pulled out of Spain's squad for the Confederations Cup after tests confirmed the Barcelona midfielder's thigh muscle injury was serious.

"At a medical level, he's not in condition to take part in the competition," the Spanish Football Federation doctor Oscar Celada said.

"There is a strong chance of a relapse. He already had one in the Champions League final and we don't want another. He will leave now."

"He could be out for six to eight weeks but that is for Barca's medical team to decide. He needs a long period of recuperation."

Valencia midfielder Pablo Hernandez will replace Iniesta, according to a report on the Valencia website.

Ribery posing a problem

AFP, Berlin

Franck Ribery could pose more a problem than a solution for his club Bayern Munich with his want-away attitude, according to former team-mate Oliver Kahn.

"Ribery is not without danger for the club," the former Germany goalkeeper told the tz daily newspaper.

"A player who constantly plays with the idea of leaving for Real Madrid, Barca or elsewhere, always makes things more nervous."

"You have to seriously consider this issue, otherwise a player becomes more a problem than a solution for a club."

Kahn, who played with Ribery during his final season as a player in 2007-8, said the former Marseille striker, a potential target of Real, Barca and Manchester United, must change his behaviour.

"Bayern have given him the chance by recruiting him to become one of the best players in Europe."

Ribery is under contract with Bayern until 2011, and the club's management have been keen to stress that he is not for sale.

Bayern set to sign Pranjic

AFP, Berlin

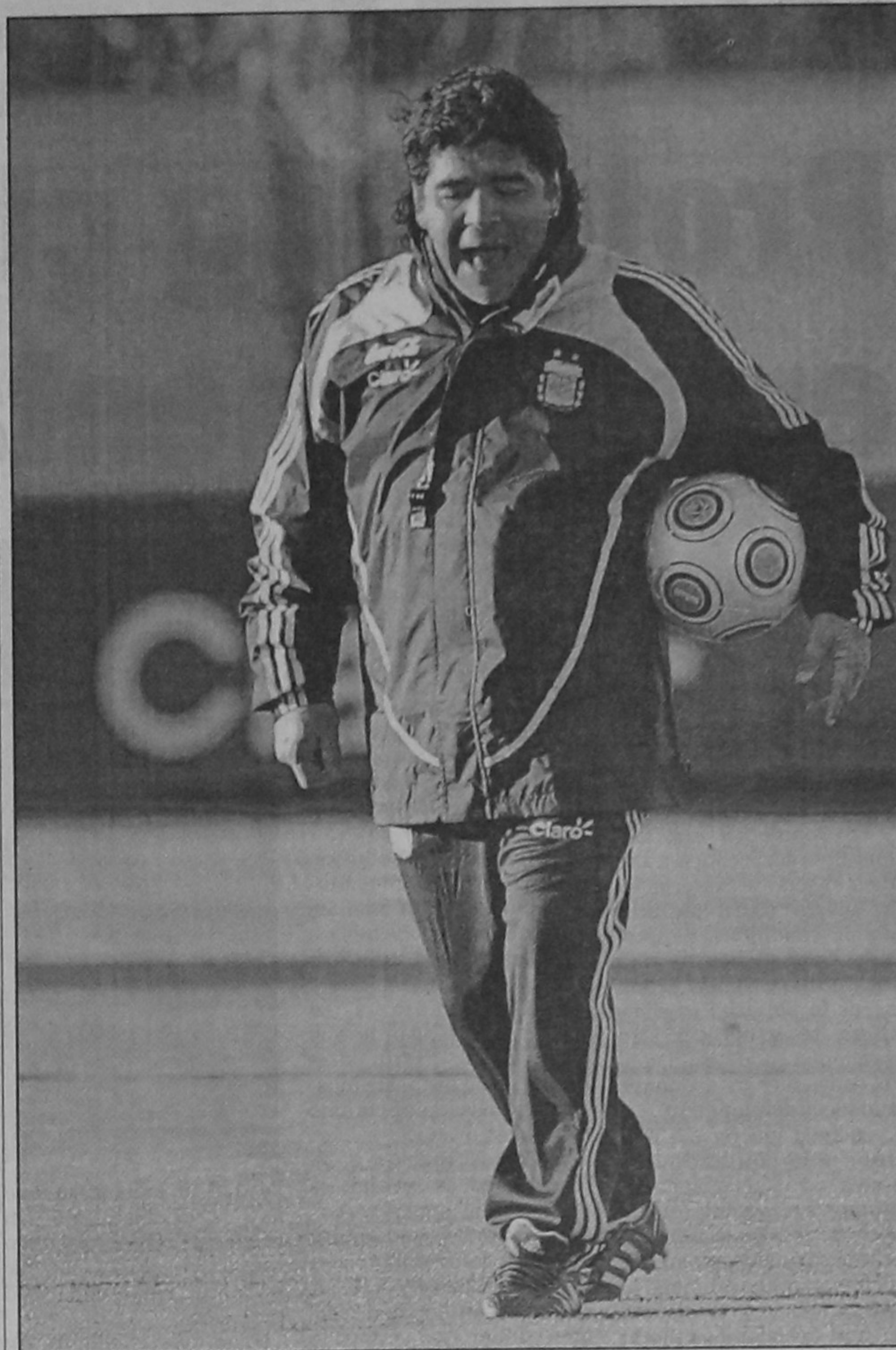
Bayern Munich are set to snap up Croatian international midfielder Danijel Pranjic from Dutch side SC Heerenveen, the German club said Thursday.

"We have reached agreement with the player but negotiations with his club have not yet been completed," said Bayern's general manager Uli Hoenes.

Bild newspaper said the transfer fee for Pranjic would be around ten million euros.

Bayern have already signed Mario Gomez, Ivica Olic, Alexander Baumjohan and Anatoli Timoschtschuk as they bid to go one better than last season's runner-up finish to Wolfsburg.

"I will give it my all to fulfil the confidence (new Bayern coach) Louis Van Gaal has in me," said Pranjic, who starred for Croatia at Euro 2008.



Argentina coach Diego Maradona shouts instructions during a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires on Thursday.

Crunch time for Argentina

AFP, Montevideo

It's getting close to crunch time for Argentina approaching the final straight of Latin America's long slog of 2010 World Cup qualifying.

A 6-1 mauling in their last outing at high altitude in Bolivia in April was the albiceleste's worst loss in six decades and heaped acute embarrassment on coach Diego Maradona, whose side have to seek redemption Saturday at home to Colombia.

Argentina currently occupy the last of the four guaranteed qualifying slots for the finals in South Africa with 19 points from 12 games - five adrift of Paraguay, two behind eternal rivals Brazil and one shy of Chile's 20.

With Uruguay breathing down their necks on 17 points the Argentines cannot afford to slip up against a Colombian side which would, in the event of a shock win, close the gap to just two points in a tight

regional contest.

As Maradona, a controversial choice as coach last year, seeks to fend off the increasingly frequent brickbats, Brazil counterpart Dunga is not without his own critics as media and fans alike moan that his style is not as full of flair as they might like.

But in defence, Dunga has assembled an effective unit as witnessed by just five goals conceded to date.

A win in Montevideo would move the Brazilians seven points ahead of Uruguay with just five games to go - but the visitors will be aware that they

have not tasted success at the Centenario stadium since 1976.

In addition, Uruguay, while infuriatingly inconsistent, have scored more goals, 21, than anyone else in the group. The Uruguayans have every reason to want to avoid the potential heartbreaker of a playoff against the fourth-placed side from the North American and Caribbean grouping Concacaf as they lost out in 2005 to Australia at the same stage.

As Brazil and Argentina try to keep the flag flying for the big guns it is Paraguay who will be out to retain the top spot they have hung onto since the early stages although third-placed Chile will be a tough rival in Asuncion.

Ecuador, level on 14 points with Colombia, will bid to stay in the hunt with an away win Sunday over rock bottom Andean rivals Peru in Lima while in the remaining encounter Bolivia will seek to use the altitude once again to their advantage against fellow strugglers Venezuela.

With debts of 300 million pounds plus it is costing them 35 million - they are paying an awful lot of money on their debt.

"They seem to be paying rates of 10 percent - that shows how difficult it has been to refinance their debt."

Cannon went on to argue that Hicks and Gillett would have to sell other assets to reduce the debt or bring in new investors.

"They can't really seriously think in terms of another six-month extension - they need long-term secure financing," he said.

Rogan Taylor, who has been attempting to organise a buyout of the club by fans who would then run it on the Barcelona model, said the latest figures showed how Hicks and Gillett had transformed Liverpool from a club with sound finances into a "debt-laden creature," to the anger of most of the club's fans.

"It is an opportunity though," Taylor added. "Let's get rid of these American no-marks and get on with life."

Liverpool's ability to generate match-day revenue would be significantly increased by a move to a bigger stadium but plans to construct a new 60,000-seat arena close to Anfield have had to be shelved indefinitely because of the owners' financial problems.

"Turnover is going up, trading profit is going up but they are still making a loss," he



Swedish players Olof Mellberg (L) and Zlatan Ibrahimovic (C) train at the Rasunda Stadium in Stockholm on Thursday.

New Zealand arrive in SA

AFP, Johannesburg

The New Zealand national football team, the Oceania champions, arrived Thursday in South Africa for the Confederations Cup tournament which kicks-off next week.

"We have never had a point in the Confederations Cup before, and to win a game would be an incredible experience for us," said coach Ricki Herbert.

The team's first match is on Sunday June 14 against European champions Spain in Rustenburg, north of Johannesburg.

"People must not underestimate us, we are here to win a game. It is important for the country, that we compete at this level with some of the best teams in the world," said Herbert.

The All Whites were the first team to arrive for the tournament which runs June 14-28.

Captain Tim Brown said he was confident of the teams prospects in the tournament.

"We played our first game, we just assembled our squad and we are getting to know each other. We come here as big underdogs, we are excited about that," said Brown.

"We are excited about surprising a lot of people," he said.

The team soon departed for neighbouring Botswana where they will play a friendly match Saturday against the country's national side.

Domenech slams booing

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech on Thursday said the jeering of his players during their 1-0 friendly defeat to Nigeria on Tuesday was "a form of racism."

The 1998 World Cup winners were whistled at throughout by a less than appreciative St Etienne crowd, who reserved most of their ire for players from local rivals Lyon.

"It's a form of racism, whistling at players because they don't belong to your club," said Domenech, himself a former Lyon player,

whose side take on Euro 2008 semi-finalists Turkey in another friendly in Lyon on Friday.

"I'll never stomach it, like I'll never stomach the other forms of racism."

"The other (whistles) are understandable (due to the defeat), but the whistles when (Lyon players) Karim Benzema and Sidney Govou came on I will never accept. It's absurd and it always will be."

Benzema, 21, has endured a disappointing season, having seen his club side fail to win the French title for the first time since 2001 and struggling to nail down a starting place in the French

first XI.

Domenech revealed that, although Benzema had shrugged off the incident, he had clearly been unsettled by it.

"Karim was affected," the French coach said. "At 20 or 21 it's not always obvious. He pretended not to be, he said the opposite, but it's clear to see, he reacted in a different way."

"I felt that he was really affected. You can be prepared for anything, but when it happens it's never as you expect."

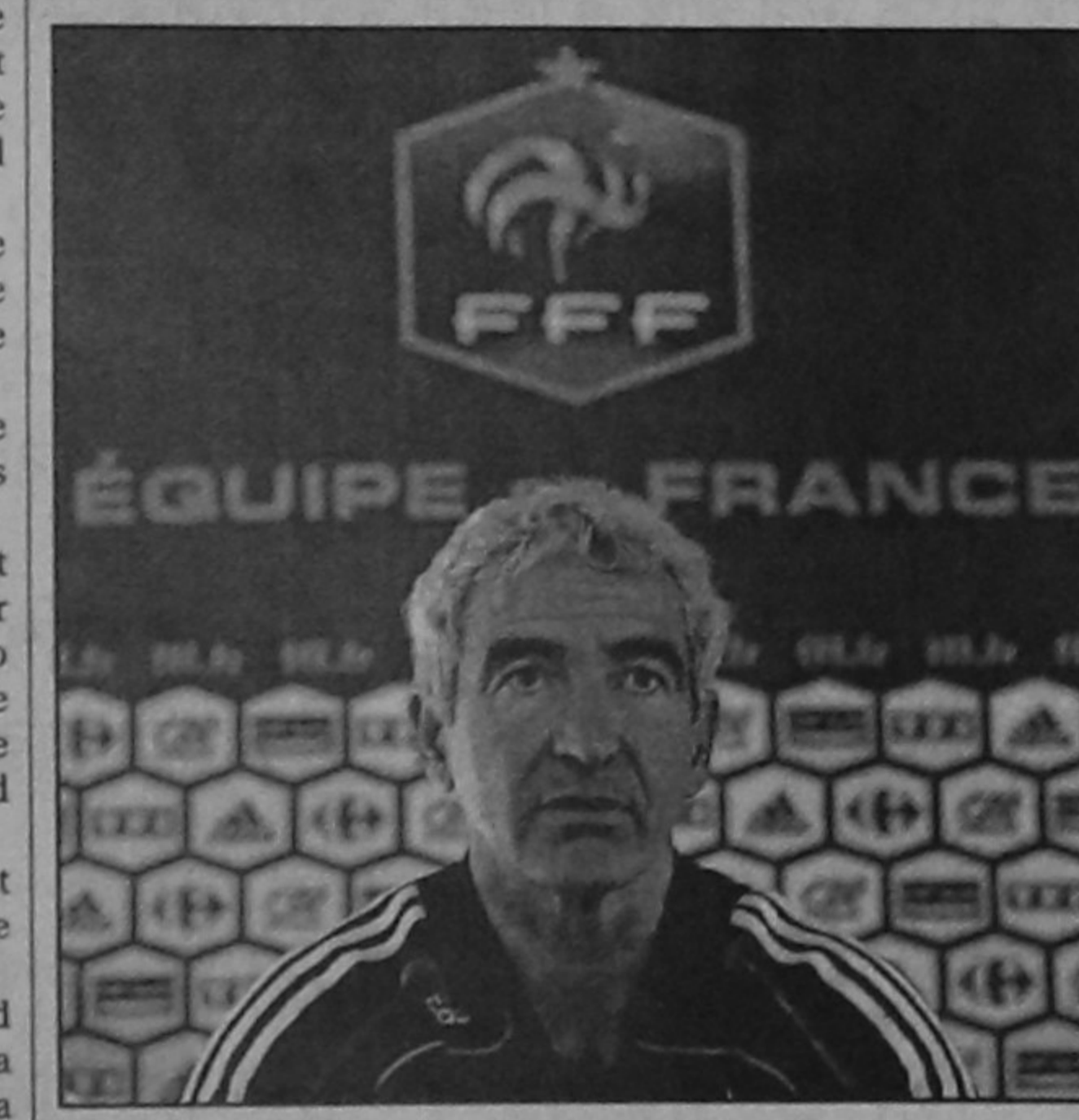
France's unconvincing start to their World Cup qualifying campaign means they are currently two points behind leaders Serbia in European group seven with five games remaining, and Domenech believes the only way to get the fans back onside is to produce some better performances on the pitch.

"It's up to us to have the attitude and the performances to make sure people don't have to react," he said.

"The players always want to react, to play well, to perform."

"They were a bit shocked (against Nigeria) and we cannot play in the same way again. I hope they have learned their lesson. If we make the same mistakes twice, it's a concern."

France's World Cup qualifying campaign resumes on August 12 with a trip to perennial whipping boys the Faroe Islands, followed by a home encounter with second-bottom Romania on September 5.



France coach Raymond Domenech addresses a press conference at the Gerland Stadium in Lyon on Thursday.



Latin America's long slog of 2010 World Cup qualifying.

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