

Injured Ribery picked

Football

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech has sprung a surprise by naming Bayern Munich midfielder Franck Ribery in his 22-man squad for the World Cup qualifier with the Faroe Isles in Torshavn on August 12.

Ribery is still recovering from a knee injury and, having last trained on July 12, indicated recently he was not yet match-fit.

Domenech said that since Ribery could play for Bayern in their German Bundesliga opener next week, he would have no qualms about using the midfielder for "a brief spell".

"Franck said he would not be match fit for a full match but I've since spoken to him by telephone," said Domenech.

"He is back training with Bayern, and he could play against Hoffenheim (on August 8) and so he could be useful for us even if it's just for a brief spell."

"I wouldn't have called him up if he was in pain. That's not the way I operate."

Meanwhile former midfield marshal Patrick Vieira has not made the squad. The 33-year-old France

skipper has already resumed training with his club Inter Milan but, despite nursing an injured thumb, appears to be paying the price for an apparent lack of form.

Making his return to the squad after a seven-month absence, Vieira was uninspiring in France's 1-0 defeat to Nigeria in a June 2 friendly.

The Frenchman also failed to impress in Inter's friendly against Monaco last week.

While claiming he did not base his decision on Vieira's performance in either match, Domenech was unequivocal about which path Vieira had to take to fight his way back into the team.

"Pat needs a lot of match time before getting back to his normal level," said Domenech.

"He's the captain of France, we know what he brings to the team but he needs to play, get a long series of matches under his belt."

"I hope he starts playing, at Inter Milan or elsewhere, as much as possible."

In Vieira's absence Barcelona forward Thierry Henry wears the captain's armband.

France have an eight-point deficit to group 7 leaders Serbia although 'Les Bleus' have played two games less.

The winners of each group qualify automatically for the World Cup finals in South Africa next summer, with the best runners-up being forced into a play-off.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Hugo Lloris (Lyon), Steve Mandanda (Marseille), Cedric Carrasco (Bordeaux)
Defenders: Eric Abidal (Barcelona/ESP), Julien Escudé (Sevilla/ESP), Patrice Evra (Manchester United/ENG), Rod Fanni (Rennes), William Gallas (Arsenal/ENG), Bacary Sagna (Arsenal/ENG), Sebastien Squillaci (Sevilla/ESP)
Midfielders: Alou Diarra (Bordeaux), Lassana Diarra (Real Madrid/ESP), Yoann Gourcuff (Bordeaux), Florent Malouda (Chelsea/ENG), Moussa Sissoko (Toulouse), Jeremy Toulalan (Lyon), Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich/GER)
Forwards: Nicolas Anelka (Chelsea/ENG), Karim Benzema (Real Madrid/ESP), Thierry Henry (Barcelona/ESP), Andre-Pierre Gignac (Toulouse), Loic Remy (Nice)

Lamps backs England to deliver in SA

AFP, London

Frank Lampard believes England are finally ready to deliver at the World Cup thanks to Fabio Capello.

After failing to qualify for Euro 2008, England are firmly on course for next year's World Cup in South Africa.

Capello's team have won all seven of their Group Six matches and Lampard admits the transformation is down to the England coach's ability to make his players believe in themselves.

"In terms of England, I've never experienced a time when I have gone into matches feeling as confident as I do now," Chelsea midfielder Lampard told the Sun.

"The contrast with before is stark. Before, we felt we would probably lose or drop points and it gives you a really good sensation going into the season to feel so optimistic about the challenges ahead with club and country."

"I'm wary of falling into the trap where people ask if you can win it, you say you can, and then expectations rise."

"Of course we can win it, though. We are playing as well as we have done for a long time and there is a real confidence and togetherness about the group."

England's only previous World Cup success came in 1966 and they haven't even reached the semifinals since 1990.

But Lampard expects England to be a much tougher proposition for opponents now Capello has helped them develop a more ruthless streak.

"One of the things we needed in English football was to learn the importance of being a difficult team to beat," Lampard said. "That is the foundation stone and you build everything else on top."

Ipswich to name stand after Robson

AFP, Ipswich

Ipswich are considering paying tribute to Sir Bobby Robson, who died of cancer on Friday, by naming a stand at Portman Road after their legendary former manager.

Robson transformed Ipswich into one of England's top clubs during a 13-year spell that included winning the FA Cup and UEFA Cup before leaving to coach England in 1982.

The former Barcelona and Newcastle boss, who passed away aged 76, already has a statue at Portman Road, but Ipswich chief executive Simon Clegg admitted they may decide to name a stand after him as well.

"We have given serious consideration to a further permanent memorial and tribute to Sir Bobby. There are a range of ideas we are looking at and have been looking at over the past few months," Clegg told the club's website.

"Naming a stand after Sir Bobby is one of the options we have discussed and we spoke to Sir Bobby about it but he didn't feel it was appropriate until a period after he had passed away. We obviously want to respect that and will respect that."

Rosicky not concerned by duo sales

AFP, London

Arsenal midfielder Tomas Rosicky believes his side will mount a strong challenge for the Premier League despite the pre-season departures of Emmanuel Adebayor and Kolo Toure.

Arsene Wenger's team were widely written off as title also-rans after Ivory Coast defender Toure followed Togo striker Adebayor to Manchester City last month.

Toure rubbed salt into Arsenal's wounds by claiming he decided to leave because there are no longer any players willing to lead at the north London club.

But Czech Republic winger Rosicky, back in action during pre-season after 18 months out through injury, is adamant that neither Toure or Adebayor will be especially missed and he expects the Gunners to

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4



Russian star Maria Sharapova blows a kiss to the crowd after winning match point against Jarmila Groth of Slovakia in the LA Women's Tennis Championships at the Home Depot Center in Carson on Monday.

Muslims hurt by Schalke song

Football

INTERNET, undated

Football is religion for most Schalke 04 fans and the late Pope John Paul II was even an honorary club member, but some Muslims now feel offended by the official anthem of the Bundesliga club. Many German Muslims, including some Schalke fans, have voiced their protest and threatened the club over the third stanza of the "Blue and White, how I love you" anthem which, refers to the prophet Mohammed.

Schalke's home strip is blue and white. The incident was reported by some Turkish media a week ago, and by now threats have been expressed on various internet forums and prompted Schalke to work together with the police and other authorities.

Germany has some 4 million Muslim inhabitants, most of whom have a Turkish background.

The passage the Muslims consider insulting translates as following into English: "Mohammed was a prophet / who understood nothing about football / but from all the blaze of colour / he picked the blue and white."

According to the German folk song archive, the anthem is based on a hunting tune from 1797 which says "Mohammed is my patron! He knew real beauty. He, for whom only green was holy from all the colours."

The Schalke version was created in 1924 and the wording edited in 1963. It is sung ahead of every home game.

A club spokesman said that the club has received "around 350 emails," adding: "We are taking the situation very seriously and are in contact with police and state protection institutions."

Burhan Kesici, general secretary of the Islamic Council in Germany, called for restraint in the articulation of the protests but also urged Schalke to take action.

"It is not right that the prophet is mentioned in a club anthem. I would wish that out of

respect for the Muslims in this country the Mohammed stanza is not sung," Kesici told the Turkish-language service of the German Press Agency dpa.

The general secretary of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, Aiman Mazyek, said: "We will not call for the song to be outlawed, but we want information about its background. We owe that to the many Turkish fans and the players of Schalke."

While no one took offence of the third stanza up to now, Muslims in Germany have seemingly become more sensitive after the July 1 killing of Egyptian woman Marwa el-Shirbini by a right-wing extremist in a Dresden courtroom.

The incident set off a fierce round of accusations from the Muslim world that Germany was a racist, Islam-hating nation. Mazyek said that "many Muslims don't feel secure any more" after the incident.

The head of Schalke's honorary council, Protestant priest Hans-Joachim Holm, is not taking the incident light-heartedly, but also warned of a hasty reaction from the club.

Holm told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung daily that simply scrapping the controversial lines will lead to "a strong emotional backlash" from other Schalke fans.

Schalke fans have always been extremely devoted to their club which has fielded Turkish players in the past and present, including current squad member Halil Altintop.

There have also always been religious connotations. The fanzine is named "Our Schalke" and legendary right wing player Ruediger Abramczik was affectionately named "God of the crosses."

When Jehovah's Witnesses ran a poster campaign in the late 1960s in the club's home town of Gelsenkirchen under the slogan "No one can get past Jesus," some witty Schalke fans swiftly added "except Stan Libuda" in reference to another adored winger.

The late Pope John Paul II was made an honorary club member in 1987 after conducting an open air service in the club's former Park Stadium.

Maria makes solid start

AFP, Los Angeles

Unseeded Maria Sharapova easily defeated Jarmila Groth of Slovakia 6-0, 6-4 in the first round of the 700,000 dollar WTA Los Angeles Tennis Championship on Monday.

Sharapova, whose best finish in this event was two semifinal berths, advances to play third seeded Victoria Azarenka in the second round.

Still trying to recover from major shoulder surgery, Sharapova was one of four Russians to advance on Monday on the hardcourts located in the south central LA suburb of Carson.

Sharapova reached the quarterfinals last week in Stanford.

Russia's Anna Chakvetadze defeated 11th seeded Virginie Razzano of France 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 Monday. Unseeded Chakvetadze advances to face fellow Russian Alisa Kleybanova.

Elena Vesnina cruised past Agnes Szavay of Hungary 6-1, 6-0 and Kleybanova beat compatriot Alla Kudryavtseva 6-1, 6-3.

In other matches Monday, China's Peng Shuai outlasted Michaela Krajcek 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3 and Italy's Flavia Pennetta, seeded 10th, needed three sets to top unheralded American Varvara Lepchenko, 6-2, 5-7, 6-0. Pennetta was last year's runner-up to Dinara Safina, the top seed here.

The tournament features five of the world's top 10 players including world number one Safina of Russia. The 23-year-old Safina is fresh off her third title of the year, winning a marathon three-hour match in the Portoroz final.

The top eight seeded players receive a bye through the first round.

Wild card Vania King, of the US, advanced by stopping Austrian Sybille Bammer 6-3, 6-2, while Japanese veteran Ai Sugiyama topped American qualifier Carly Gullickson 6-3, 6-1.

Rovers sign Di Santo

AFP, London

Argentinian striker Franco Di Santo signed for Blackburn Rovers on loan from Premier League rivals Chelsea on Monday.

The 20-year-old has signed initially till January although Blackburn have first option on extending it, should Chelsea be willing to, till the end of the season.

He became Rovers second signing on Monday - Croatian international striker Nikola Kalinic having joined for 7.5 million euros from Hajduk Split - as manager Sam Allardyce tried to bolster his frontline having lost Roque Santa Cruz to Manchester City.

Di Santo, who has rarely featured for Chelsea since joining from Chilean outfit Audax Italiano in January 2008, could make his debut in Wednesday's home friendly against Scottish Premier League side Hibernian.

Villa agree Delph fee

AFP, Birmingham

Aston Villa are close to signing teenage star Fabian Delph from Leeds after agreeing a transfer fee for the England Under-21 midfielder.

Villa revealed on Monday that they had come to an agreement with Leeds which allows them to open talks with Delph over a move to Villa Park.

"Aston Villa can confirm that a fee has been agreed with Leeds United for Fabian Delph," a statement on Villa's website read. "Villa have been given permission to speak to the player."

Manchester City and Tottenham were also reported to be interested in the 19-year-old, who helped Leeds reach the League One play-offs and was voted the club's player of the year last season.

But Leeds insisted on dealing only with Villa despite late attempts to enter the bidding.

"Leeds United wishes to place on record our appreciation for the honourable manner in which Aston Villa have conducted their interest in the player," the Yorkshire club said in a statement.

"The club has resisted approaches from other Premier League clubs since agreeing terms with Aston Villa."

Wolfsburg face the heat

Football

INTERNET, undated

VfL Wolfsburg will feel the heat from Bayern Munich and others when they kick off the Bundesliga season on Friday as defending champions. The northern Germans won their first title three months ago thanks to the deadly attacking duo of Grafite and Edin Dzeko, and the coaching skills of Felix Magath.

While the freshly crowned German Footballer of the Year Grafite and Dzeko have renewed their contracts, Magath jumped ship to fulfil his dream of being in charge at club Schalke 04.

The new helmsman in Wolfsburg is Armin Veh, who has vowed that "we want to stay at the top" with a squad featuring more depth after the signing of Nigerian Obafemi Martins and others.

But Veh also conceded that Munich are the top title favourite in a season in which Wolfsburg will enter unknown territories with a tough schedule of Bundesliga, German cup and Champions League matches.

Friday's Bundesliga curtain-raiser will be a first indication of their form as Wolfsburg face VfB Stuttgart, the club Veh coached to the 2007 title.

Wolfsburg started slow into the last season, but a strong run after the winter break and a league-record-equalling home field result of 16 wins and one draw ensured them of the surprise title.

Grafite scored 28 goals in 25 games and Dzeko hit the net 26 times.

While Veh is aware that the two stars can't carry the team on their own through another season ("We can't expect them to play 50 matches"), the deadly duo is hungry for more success.

"I want to do even better (this season) and score more goals. If I manage to play more

games than last year then it's possible," said Grafite.

Dzeko, who was declared not for sale over interest from AC Milan, said: "I am looking forward to the Bundesliga and the Champions League. We have high expectations at Wolfsburg."

Kicker sports magazine said that while Magath had turned "a scrap yard car into a luxury vehicle" during his reign, Veh's main challenge will now be "fine-tuning."

An important part of this were the hiring of midfielders Karim Ziani and Thomas Kahlenberg from French clubs Olympique Marseille and Auxerre, respectively, and that of the Nigerian striker Martins from England's Newcastle.

The trio cost Volkswagen-

sponsored Wolfsburg around 20 million euros (28.6 million dollars).

Algeria's Ziani and the Dane Kahlenberg will provide Veh with more midfield options and Martins offers more choices up front.

"He's exactly the kind of player we have been looking for to complement Grafite and Edin Dzeko. As he can also be used in a wide position, we have the option now of playing with two or even three strikers," said Veh.

The coach admitted to a general risk of complacency after a big success, but said he had "a good feeling" that this will not happen in Wolfsburg where the season aim is similar to that made ahead of the past season.



Inter Milan's new striker Samuel Eto'o arrives with his teammates at the Beijing International airport on Tuesday. Italian Supercup champions Inter Milan take on Cup winners Lazio at the Bird's Nest on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP



Stuttgart's new signing Russian striker Pavel Pogrebnyak (C) poses with manager Horst Held (L) and head coach Markus Babel during a press conference in Stuttgart on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP