

Demichelis blow for Bayern

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's Argentine international defender Martin Demichelis has been ruled out for up to seven weeks with a right ankle injury, the Bundesliga club announced on Thursday.

Demichelis picked up the injury in training Wednesday.

His loss for the start of the season is a blow for Bayern who had been counting on the 28-year-old after the departure of Brazilian Lucio.

He is expected to be replaced by Holger Badstuber for the German league curtain-raiser against Hoffenheim on Saturday.

German international striker Miroslav Klose is also doubtful for the season opener because of a muscular problem and star striker Franck Ribery could miss the game with a knee problem.

Diego recalls Ortega for NZ friendly

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina coach Diego Maradona announced Thursday the return to his squad of midfielder veteran Ariel Ortega for an upcoming friendly against New Zealand in Cordoba.

Argentina's squad for the September 30 encounter will be composed entirely of national league players, including Ortega, who has famously played in three World Cup campaigns but gained as much notoriety for his battle with alcoholism.

Maradona's decision comes as the 35-year-old Ortega, who plays for River Plate, continues his long fight to leave his personal problems behind him.

Maradona told radio station Mitre: "I'm going to name Ortega in the squad, Ariel is getting treatment and is continuing to train."

Throughout his impressive career Maradona also gained notoriety for cocaine use and a turbulent lifestyle which saw him balloon in weight and go on to suffer serious health problems.

The Argentine football legend said it is during such challenging times that remembering the importance of family is essential.

"He (Ortega) should think more about his kids. Having (his daughters) Dalma and Gianinna at my side helped me a lot," added Maradona. "If he does this then I'm sure he can get out of this situation."

Ortega, who played alongside Maradona in the 1994 World Cup and played in the next two editions in 1998 and 2002, began his club career at Newell's Old Boys before moving to Europe for spells with Valencia in Spain, Sampdoria and Parma in Italy and Turkish giants Fenerbahce.

"I'm really happy. It's going to do me a lot of good to pull the Argentina shirt on again," said Ortega.

Chelsea blues for Jose in transfer chase

AFP, Beijing

Inter Milan manager Jose Mourinho said Thursday attempts to buy players from his former team Chelsea have become too difficult because the London club keeps raising the price of its stars.

The Portuguese coach said he is in the market for a playmaker before the Serie A league starts at the end of the month -- but every time he approaches the southwest London club for a player he is left frustrated.

"I feel it has become very difficult for me to sign a Chelsea player and bring him to Inter Milan," Mourinho said in Beijing ahead of Saturday's Italian Super Cup final against Lazio here at the Olympic stadium, the Bird's Nest.

"Every time I am interested in one of their players, the situation becomes more difficult."

He reportedly attempted a double swoop in June to bring Portugal duo Ricardo Carvalho and Deco to the San Siro but the two players have remained at Stamford Bridge.

"When you talk about my interest in Deco, I find it has become too difficult because the situation looks quite different (each time he approaches Chelsea)," he said, referring to the cost for the midfielder schemer.

Bommel looks to succeed

AFP, Berlin



Midfield tough-guy Mark van Bommel leads Bayern Munich into the new Bundesliga season on Saturday determined to stamp his authority and that of new coach Louis van Gaal on the Bavarian giants.

The two Dutchmen are key to Bayern's hopes of wresting the title back from Wolfsburg after finishing an agonising two points behind the shock champions last season.

Van Gaal, who has followed the sacked Jurgen Klinsman into the Bayern hotseat, believes van Bommel is the right man for the job as another marathon league and European Champions League season beckons.

"I saw that Mark has a huge influence on the team," said van Gaal. "He's a big supporter of my philosophy, my methods and my values. That matters to me. I need someone to represent me on the field."

Van Bommel, 32, was delighted to be handed his Dutch compatriot's vote of confidence.

"You're always proud and delighted to be appointed captain of such a big club," he said.

Bayern begin their cam-

aign on Saturday away at Hoffenheim, the unfashionable side who led the top flight for long spells in 2008-2009 before they fell away.

Striker Mario Gomez, signed for a club record 30 million euros from Stuttgart, has a groin strain, but should start for Bayern although question marks remain over French international Franck Ribery, who has been dogged by knee trouble.

The highly-sought Ribery admits that he needs to be patient.

"We reported back on July 1, but I've only been involved in four or five training sessions since then," he said.

"It'll do me a lot of good to work out with the team again. I miss the football, and working out by yourself is no fun."

Bayern's Argentine international defender Martin Demichelis has already been ruled out for up to seven weeks with a right ankle injury while German international striker Miroslav Klose is also doubtful

because of a muscle problem. But new signings Anatoli Tymoshchuk and Ivica Olic are expected to play.

Champions Wolfsburg kick-off the new season on Friday against Stuttgart.

Markus Babel, the Stuttgart coach, believes big-spending Bayern are the team to stop.

"It has to be Bayern," Babel, a former Bayern stalwart told www.uefa.com.

"They are the one club who have the right to expect the title every season, especially this year after they spent so much."

Wolfsburg coach Armin Veh, who replaced title-winning Felix Magath, has added former Newcastle striker Obafemi Martins to the champion's squad which will include last season's 54-goal pairing of Edin Dzeko and Grafite.

Stuttgart have been busy in the transfer market signing Zenit St. Petersburg forward Pavel Pogrebnyak and former favourite Aleksandr Hleb from Barcelona.

Magath, who is now at Schalke, starts his new season against Nuremberg but believes patience and team-building will be key at the Gelsenkirchen outfit.

"We are aiming for the title," said Magath. "I don't know how long that will take; that's why I signed a four-year deal."

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Borussia Dortmund v Cologne, Hertha Berlin v Hannover 96, Mainz v Bayer Leverkusen, Nuremberg v Schalke 04, Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich, Werder Bremen v Eintracht Frankfurt
Sunday	SC Freiburg v Hamburg, VfL Bochum v Borussia Moenchengladbach

Milan in for Huntelaar

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan are set to sign unhappy Real Madrid striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, according to the Italian club's vice-president Adriano Galliani.

Galliani said agreement had been reached with Real Madrid and that Huntelaar would arrive later in the day ahead of being put through a medical.

"He will go through a routine medical before signing his contract," Galliani told Sky Sport 24 television.

Real confirmed on its website that the two clubs "have reached an agreement on the transfer" of Huntelaar to Milan.

Earlier Thursday Gazzetta dello Sport newspaper claimed Milan will pay 15 million euros for the Dutchman who would be given a contract until 2013 with an annual net salary of three million euros.

Huntelaar, who will turn 26 years old on August 12, finished as the Dutch league's top scorer with 33 goals in 2007-2008 when he played for Amsterdam giants Ajax.

He then moved to Real on a four-and-a-

half-year deal in December 2008 for a fee of 27 million euros but since then he has played only 19 matches for a return of eight goals.

Last month Huntelaar tried in vain to get out of his contract with Real in a bid to join Stuttgart in Germany's Bundesliga.

It now appears he could resurrect his career, if given the chance, at the club owned by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

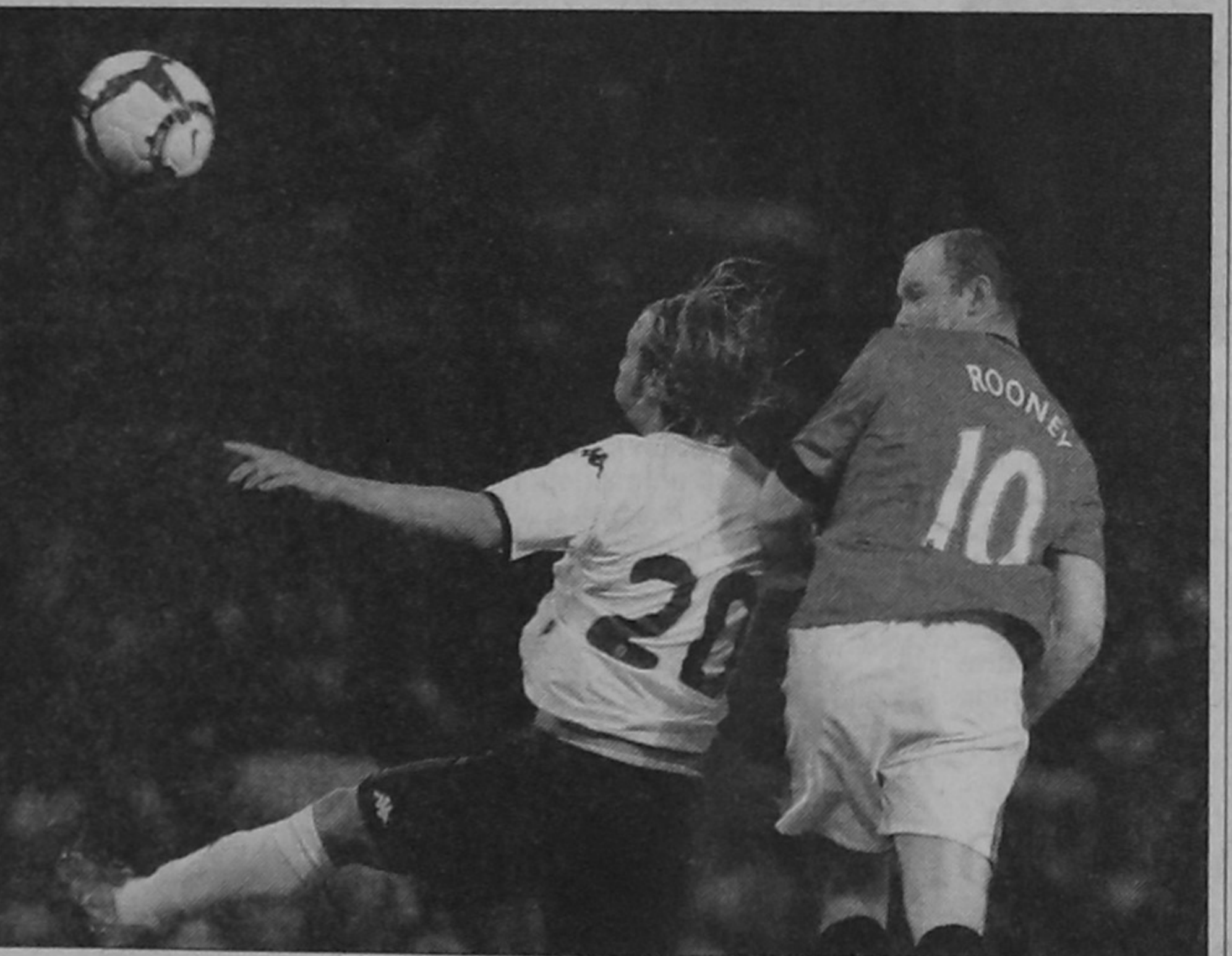
The Serie A club have been quiet on the transfer market this summer but Berlusconi said Wednesday this is about to change.

"The club have freed up funds and commissioned (club vice-president) Adriano Galliani to purchase a top striker," Berlusconi told a press conference at the club's Milanello base.

"The names (of the strikers) you already know," he said.

The club lost their best forward with the sale of Brazilian Kaka to Real Madrid. But reports from Italy claim the club are chasing Brazilian Luis Fabiano (Sevilla), Huntelaar and Peruvian Claudio Pizarro (Chelsea).

AC Milan's current strikers include Brazilians Ronaldinho and Pato and Italians Filippo Inzaghi and Marco Borriello.



Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney (R) scores past Valencia's Alexis during their friendly match at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

Valencia shines in win

Football

SOCCERNET

Sir Alex Ferguson hailed the impact Antonio Valencia has made at Manchester United after the Old Trafford new boy set up both goals in Wednesday night's 2-0 win over Valencia.

Valencia has been Ferguson's most expensive recruit during a relatively quiet summer, the winger arriving from Wigan for £17m.

His introduction to United ranks was delayed due to work permit problems but the former Wigan man is making up for lost time in his quest to fill the void created by the world-record exit of Cristiano Ronaldo.

"It was a very exciting performance," said Ferguson.

"It was a real winger's effort. He showed great speed, power and balance."

"Coming to our club he has immediately taken on the challenge and we are very pleased with what we have seen from him so far."

neat finish late on. Ferguson has confirmed Cleverley may be set for another spell away from United after spending time on loan with Leicester last term.

However, Michael Owen is very much a Manchester United player after receiving a warm welcome from the Red Devils faithful.

Owen also had a chance to impress watching England coach Fabio Capello. The Italian overlooked him throughout last season, citing lack of fitness and poor form as the reasons.

Owen has remained healthy in seven games since his surprise capture by Ferguson, only to fluff his lines in front of Capello, wasting a series of glorious chances - the best of which was provided by Rooney.

"While it could be argued merely getting in position to score was a plus, whether Capello will be as easily won over remains to be seen. However, Ferguson was delighted with the striker's effort."

"It would have been nice for Michael to score - he deserved one," said the Scot.

"He probably should have had four. He showed marvellous movement at times and when he took that great pass from Wayne Rooney, he put the ball over the keeper but just past the post."



Real Madrid's new signing Xabi Alonso runs during a training session in Madrid on Wednesday.

Wenger to bid for Vieira

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger admits Arsenal have yet to step up their bid to bring former captain Patrick Vieira back to north London.

Gunners boss Wenger had hinted he may make a move for France midfielder Vieira after the Inter Milan star expressed an interest in returning to the Premier League.

But Wenger, who ended Vieira's nine-year stay in England when he sold the Arsenal legend to Juventus in 2005, has made little progress towards completing a deal.

"Not at the moment, no," Wenger said on Thursday when asked if they were close to signing Vieira.

"We can still make do with one or two players more. One could be in the defensive areas, and one in the attacking areas."

Wenger, speaking at Arsenal's charity launch at the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, added: "We make a few enquires for players, but we are nowhere near to signing anybody at the moment."

"Usually the transfer market speeds up from August 26 up to midnight on 31st, especially in the last two hours."

Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho said they had not been approached by either Arsenal or Tottenham for Vieira. Spurs coach Harry Redknapp has also expressed an interest in the 33-year-old.

"If they want him, they have to tell us. At this moment I have to say neither Arsenal or Tottenham has contacted the club," said Mourinho ahead of Saturday's Italian Super Cup final against Lazio at Beijing's Olympic Stadium.

"Vieira will start on the bench on Saturday. We have 24 players in the squad and each team is only allowed 18 players for the match. When Vieira is on the bench, he is an option."

Meanwhile, Czech winger Tomas Rosicky could miss the start of the season after suffering a hamstring injury in training just weeks after returning to action following his 18-month injury lay-off.

"Six weeks ago I did not know how strong Eduardo would come back or how strong Rosicky would come back, despite the setback he has had," Wenger added.

"I believe they will play an important part in our season."

Xabi denies Rafa strife

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish international Xabi Alonso denied reports that he left Liverpool because he did not get along with the English club's coach Rafael Benitez, saying Thursday the two had a "cordial" relationship.

"I have said numerous times that my relationship with him was purely professional and cordial, of mutual respect, the classic player-coach relationship," the 27-year-old midfielder told sports daily Marca.

Alonso on Wednesday signed a four-year contract with Real Madrid which the Spanish club said would put an end to its mega pre-season spending spree.

The club gave no financial details but Spanish media have reported that the deal was worth 30 million euros (43 million dollars).

"Being a Real Madrid player is a huge responsibility. I accept this challenge and I will try to bring to this team everything that I know how to do," said Alonso.

"We should form a compact team to offer a good show and great football," he added.

Benitez said Wednesday he was keen to keep Alonso but he knew that would not be possible when the former Real Sociedad star asked for a transfer three months ago.

"We would have liked to have kept him but as soon as he told us that he wanted to leave we started working, looking for players and trying to do the best deal for the club," he told Liverpool's website.

"The first idea was to keep him and the second one was to find the best price and the best replacement for us," the Spanish coach added.

Arsenal test for Celtic

AFP, Paris



Celtic were brought back to earth with a bump on Friday after being drawn with English Premier League giants Arsenal in the draw for the play-off stage of the Champions League.

Celtic maintained their interest in Europe's premier club competition on Wednesday by overcoming a 1-0 first leg defeat to Dynamo Moscow in third round qualifying to win the second leg in Russia 2-0.

But the Scottish Premier League runners-up will now have to better Arsenal over two legs if they are to become one of the 10 teams from this draw to join the 22 already qualified for the lucrative group stages.

Elsewhere in the draw, composed of 10 champions group teams and 10 non-

champions groups teams, there were few major shocks - and a couple of clubs with smiles on their faces.

Former French champions Lyon, who over the years have consistently made the quarter-finals of the competition, were handed what looked a plum draw against Belgian league runners-up side Anderlecht.

Two of the tightest battles for a group stage spot could take place between Sporting Lisbon, who drew Italians Fiorentina, and Greek side Panathinaikos who were drawn with Atletico Madrid.

The other draw in the non-Champions group pitted German side VfB Stuttgart with Romanian outfit Timisoara.

Meanwhile there were some unpredictable matchups from the 'Champions group' draw.

Greek champions Olympiakos will play their first of their two legs against FC Sheriff in Romania, while Austrian champions FC Salzburg will host Israeli counterparts Maccabi Haifa.

In the first leg champions Ventspils, bidding to become the first Latvian side in the group stages, will host Swiss counterparts FC Zurich.

Danish champions FC Copenhagen host Apollon Nicosia of Cyprus in the first leg while Bulgarian title-winners Levski Sofia host Hungarian champions Debrecen.

The first legs of the play-off will be held on August 18 and 19, with the second leg held on August 25 and 26. The winners go into the group stages while the losers drop into the inaugural Europa League group stage.

Aquilani given licence to thrill

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez expects Alberto Aquilani to prove a big hit with Anfield fans when the Italy international completes his transfer from Roma.

Benitez had a 20 million pounds bid for Aquilani accepted earlier this week and the 25-year-old is due to fly to Liverpool for a medical before signing a four-year contract.

The Spanish coach believes his move for the dynamic midfielder will add a touch of flair to his team.

"Roma have allowed us to talk with him, so that's good and positive. He is a player with the quality we are looking for," Benitez said.

"He can play a little bit higher than Javier Mascherano, maybe between him and Steven Gerrard."

"I think the signing should excite the fans. He is a good passer, the final ball is good, and he also works. If he can settle down properly in England he can be a very good addition."

Ballack in, Frings out

AFP, Frankfurt

Michael Ballack has been called up for Germany's World Cup qualifier against Azerbaijan in Baku on August 12 but coach Joachim Loew has left veteran midfielder Torsten Frings out of his lineup announced on Thursday.

Ballack, 32, was forced to fly home early from his club Chelsea's pre-season tour of the United States with a fractured toe, but the midfielder is set to figure in the Community Shield clash with Manchester United on Sunday.

And Loew admitted that before the start of the German football season this week he had opted to play it safe.

"Calling up players even before the first day of the Bundesliga is not an easy thing ... that's why we've decided mainly to take players that we know well," explained Loew.

Loew, however, opted to overlook Frings, who has been out of favour since Euro 2008, where Germany finished runners-up.

"Torsten is a very experienced player with almost 80 caps who, if he is called up, has to take to the field. I've spoken to him and told him that for the moment Thomas Hitzlsperger had the advantage in this position," said Loew.

Since Euro 2008 the 32-year-old Frings has fallen out of favour. He made just one six-minute appearance in a World Cup qualifier against Russia, and played in a 1-0 friendly loss to Norway earlier this year.

Still without a regular replacement in goal since the international retirement of Jens Lehmann, Loew has opted for the experienced hands of Robert Enke (Hanover) and Tim Wiese (Bremen), over the new guard Rene Adler (Bayer Leverkusen) and Manuel Neuer (Schalke 04).

The only newcomer in the line-up is Stuttgart midfielder Sami Khedira.

Brazilian striker Cacau, who recently gained German citizenship, has been called up after his participation in the tour of Asia earlier this summer.

Germany are currently leading Group 4 one point ahead of Russia, who they play on October 10.

Azerbaijan, coached by German Berti Vogts, are fifth with one point.

SQUAD	
Goalkeepers:	Robert Enke (Hanover), Tim Wiese (Werder Bremen)
Defenders:	Arne Friedrich (Hertha Berlin), Philipp Lahm (Bayern Munich), Per Mertesacker (Werder Bremen), Marcel Schafer (VfL Wolfsburg), Serdar Tasci (Stuttgart), Heiko Westermann (Schalke 04)
Midfielders:	Michael Ballack (ENG/Chelsea), Christian Gentner (VfL Wolfsburg), Thomas Hitzlsperger (Stuttgart), Marcell Jansen (Hamburg), Sami Khedira (Stuttgart), Mesut Ozil (Werder Bremen), Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich), Piotr Trochowski (Hamburg)
Strikers:	Cacau (Stuttgart), Mario Gomez (Bayern Munich), Miroslav Klose (Bayern Munich), Lukas Podolski (Cologne)