

Diego's Russian test

Football

AFP, Moscow

Two-time world champions Argentina will test their skills and physical condition ahead of a crucial 2010 World Cup qualifier with Brazil in a friendly match with the hosts Russia here on Wednesday.

Russia, who reached the semifinals at the last year's European championships in Austria and Switzerland, have never met Argentina before, but the South Americans have a winning record in their previous matches with the Soviet national side.

Argentina secured three wins, including the teams' only meeting at the World Cup (2-0 in 1990), and suffered two defeats at the hands of the Soviet squad. Six matches ended in draws.

Argentina's coach Diego Maradona said earlier this month that he was not happy with the decision to play a friendly in Moscow, calling the match useless and ill-timed.

"We need to concentrate completely on the

preparations for the crucial qualifier with Brazil, while this match would hardly help us to prepare for it the best way," the press quoted Maradona as saying.

"I don't like the idea of playing in Moscow ahead of the match with Brazil."

In Wednesday's match Argentina will be without three of their stars as defender Martin Demichelis, midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron and striker Carlos Tevez were all on the injured list.

Russia's Dutch manager Guus Hiddink will also be without Spartak Moscow midfielder Vladimir Bystrov, who was sidelined with a thigh injury and Chelsea winger Yuri Zhirkov, who has still failed to overcome his knee injury.

Hiddink said he was happy with a chance to test his team in the match against strong opponents ahead of the 2010 World Cup qualifiers with Liechtenstein and Wales next month.

"For me every match my team plays is very important even if it's a friendly game," Hiddink said. "And I expect an interesting rivalry between two strong opponents on Wednesday."

Jarque's body brought back to Spain

AFP, Barcelona

The body of Espanyol captain and defender Daniel Jarque was brought back to Spain on Tuesday, three days after he died from heart failure while on a pre-season tour of Italy.

Fans will be able to pay their respects for the 26-year-old at a chapel set up at the Spanish club's recently inaugurated new stadium between 2:00 pm and 6:00 pm (1600 GMT) before a private funeral is held for the player, the club said.

"The family is devastated because nobody expects something like this," Espanyol president Daniel Sanchez Llibre, who accompanied Jarque's body back from Italy, told reporters.

Jarque, who was about to become a father, had trained on Saturday morning but collapsed in his hotel room in Cerveriano while talking to his girlfriend on the telephone in the early evening.

Since his death hundreds of fans have left candles, flowers and blue and white Espanyol jerseys at the club's stadium in Barcelona as a tribute to the player, who had just been made captain for the new season.

Jarque came up through the club's youth ranks, helping them win the King's Cup in 2006 and reach the UEFA Cup final in 2007.

In the last campaign, he featured in 36 league matches and scored two goals.

Flu-hit C'Ron pulls out

AFP, Lisbon

Cristiano Ronaldo has returned from Real Madrid's pre-season tour of North America with the flu and has been ruled out of Portugal's midweek friendly against Liechtenstein, the Portuguese football federation confirmed on Monday.

The 24-year-old will be replaced by Lazio striker Eliseu for the tie in Vaduz on Wednesday. Eliseu was not named in coach Carlos Queiroz's 18-man squad but won the Italian Super Cup title with Lazio in Beijing on Saturday.

The game is the last chance for Queiroz to fine tune his team for upcoming qualifiers against Denmark and Hungary on September 5 and 9.

After six of 10 qualifiers Portugal sit third in Group 1, seven points behind leaders Denmark.

Lack of signings worry Moyes

AFP, Liverpool

Everton manager David Moyes admitted Monday he was worried by the club's failure to bolster their squad ahead of the new season.

Moyes knows he is in a race against time to bring in new players ahead of the club's Europa League play-off tie against Czech side Sigma Olomouc later this month.

"We are not ready as far as the squad goes, we want more players in," said Moyes, who has rejected bids for Joleon Lescott and Louis Saha.

"We let a few go in the summer - Andy van der Meide, Lars Jacobson, Nuno Valente - and we have not replaced any of those players yet."

"If we want a run in Europe we need more players quickly. The search goes on, it has never stopped all summer and I am feeling a bit demented with it all now!"

"Apart from a couple of clubs, the transfer activity around the country has been limited. But for us, to have finished fifth and reached a cup final, to improve on that costs a lot of money."

"But we don't have that money. So trying to find players who are cheap, don't want much wages and will come here to improve us, well, it is not easy."

So far, Moyes has only brought in Brazilian striker Jo on loan from Manchester City and a few untried youngsters who will be in the reserve squad.

And he remains hopeful of a positive outcome in his bid for Arsenal defender Philippe Senderos.

Moyes said: "We have a good team but what we do not have is back-up, and that is what we are trying to get."

"The bid for Senderos has been with Arsenal for a while now, and maybe it is getting closer."



Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas (R) challenges teammate Fernando Torres during a training session at Las Rozas Sport City in Madrid on Monday. Spain faces Macedonia in an international friendly on Wednesday.

More than a friendly

Football

AFP, Tallinn

For football minnows Estonia, Wednesday's friendly with giants Brazil is about far more than just honing the team ahead of next month's 2010 World Cup qualifiers against Turkey and Spain.

"Brazil only has two friendlies this year. They played the first one with Italy in February and now they're playing Estonia. We feel very proud that we've got the world's absolute kings of football in Tallinn," Estonian federation spokesman Mihkel Uibolet told AFP.

"Having Brazil here is like 11 Madonnas visiting Estonia all at the same time," Uibolet added, referring to last week's headline-grabbing concert in Tallinn by the eponymous Queen of Pop.

But Estonia are not blinded by the stars, even though the game has all the makings of a serious mismatch: Brazil top the 203-team rankings established by world football's gov-

erning body FIFA, while Estonia are 112th.

"No doubt if you look at the statistics, Brazil are the strongest team Estonia have ever faced. But at the same time when I watched Brazil on TV playing at the Confederations Cup this summer I realised they are just ordinary people who also get into trouble sometimes," coach Tarmo Ruutli told reporters on Monday.

Estonia may be second-from-bottom in the six-team Group 5 of Europe's World Cup qualifiers, ahead of Armenia, but they have managed what for them is a half-decent run so far.

They have five points from six games, and their 7-0 drubbing away in Bosnia last September contrasts with their holding Turkey 0-0 at home the following month.

Estonia's players may not be global names like the Brazilians, but Uibolet singled out a trio on whom the team is counting.

He cited midfielder Ragnar Klavan, who plays for Dutch top-flight side Alkmaar, centre-back Raio Piiroja, of Norway's Fredrikstad, and goalkeeper Sergei Pareiko, of Russian club Toms.

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Gerrard out of Dutch game

AFP, London

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has pulled out of the England squad for Wednesday's friendly against the Netherlands in Amsterdam because of a groin strain.

The midfielder trained on Monday but felt a slight soreness in the leg and it was decided to pull him out of the squad as a precaution.

The remainder of Fabio Capello's squad was able to make the trip to the Netherlands and they will have a training session at the Amsterdam Arena later Tuesday.

Goalkeeper Ben Foster has already been replaced by Joe Hart after hurting his knee in Manchester United's Community Shield defeat to Chelsea on Sunday.

Rosenberg replace Milan

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will face Norway's Rosenberg in the 31st edition of the Santiago Bernabeu trophy instead of Italian side AC Milan, the Spanish club said Monday.

The tournament was to be played on August 24 against the Italian side but Real changed the date on the advice of UEFA, which was concerned that it would clash with the Atletico Madrid-Panathinaikos Champions League match that day.

AC Milan refused all other alternative dates proposed by Real and were replaced by Rosenberg as a result, Real said in a statement posted on their website.

The trophy commemorates former club president Santiago Bernabeu and is played each year at the stadium that bears his name with a different team invited each time.

Real had billed the match against AC Milan as a clash between "the two most-heralded teams of Europe" since the two sides have won a total of 16 European Cups.

West Ham sign Kovac

AFP, Prague

West Ham have signed Radoslav Kovac on a permanent deal from Spartak Moscow following the Czech international's successful loan spell at Upton Park last season.

The 29-year-old impressed in his 10 appearances after joining the Hammers for the second half of last season.

The defensive midfielder has gotten his wish to return to Upton Park with Spartak confirming the transfer for an undisclosed fee, his agent Viktor Kolar confirmed on Monday.

Domenech fires warning

Football

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech has warned that nothing short of victory will suffice against old foes the Faroe Islands, now managed by former Republic of Ireland boss Brian Kerr, in Wednesday's 2010 World Cup qualifier.

A glance at the Group 7 standings explains the French boss's unease ahead of the game in Torshavn with his men lagging eight points behind leaders Serbia, albeit with two games in hand.

The winners of each group qualify automatically for South Africa with the best runners-up being forced into a play-off, an eventuality Domenech wants to avoid at all costs.

"Anything barring victory is a catastrophe," the man who led France to the 2006 World Cup finals insisted in a video published on the French Football Federation's website.

Domenech added: "If the team plays to its level we know that we can win the match, but if we under perform, if we ask ourselves questions, if we think about what happens afterwards..."

"This is a game that can lead us (to South Africa) or knock us out of World Cup qualifying, we have to fully take onboard the importance of this fixture."

France are no strangers to this island of

48,000 inhabitants halfway between Iceland and Norway in the North Atlantic, and they will be praying for a less eventful journey than in 2007.

On that occasion atrocious weather led to a horror flight with Thierry Henry and company eventually touching down just four hours before kick-off after spending half a day travelling.

That didn't prevent them running out 6-0 winners on their way to qualifying for Euro 2008, and Domenech is looking for a similarly assured performance this time around.

He stressed the importance of scoring smartly against rivals that are ranked 154 places below France in FIFA's world standings.

"We have to score that first goal which can make the difference like (in the 6-0 win in 2007) and not suffer like martyrs because we can't score (as in 2004 when France edged the encounter 2-0) and remain at the mercy of a corner, free-kick or a counter-attack."

To general surprise he named Franck Ribery in his squad despite the Bayern Munich star missing the weekend's Bundesliga curtain-raiser with Hoffenheim following his problems with first blisters, then tendonitis.

"He could be useful for us even if it's just for a brief spell," the French boss said last week.

Captain Patrick Vieira, who is lacking match fitness, did not make the call-up, and Barcelona dangerman Henry was ruled out on Monday with an Achilles tendon problem.



PHOTO: AFP

French star Franck Ribery gives the thumbs up after a training session in Clairefontaine on Monday.



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