

Gerrard set for return

AFP, London

Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard is on course for a return to action against Manchester City in the Premier League on Saturday after recovering from a groin injury.

The England midfielder used the international break last weekend to further rest the injury and he now believes that he has put it behind him.

"I felt very tired after the (Birmingham) game as I wasn't really ready to return. I'd done very little training in the three weeks beforehand," Gerrard said.

"It took me two or three days to recover from that game but I have spent the past week doing strengthening work."

"I'm feeling a lot better now. I'm looking forward to the weekend. There's no mental hurdle to cross."

"I've had a problem in my groin that has taken a while to get over, but I'm just relieved the second injection seems to have done the trick."

"It's a case of so far so good and the aim now is to make sure I get a good week's training under my belt so I'm ready for the game with City."

Gerrard is anxious to help Liverpool reignite their campaign.

"Some of the lowest points in my career have come about when I have had to miss big games for Liverpool and England through injury," he told the club website.

"It's never easy when you have to sit out games against Manchester United or trips away from home in the Champions League."

"If the lads are winning games and doing well, it makes the pain a bit easier so obviously the last couple of weeks have been extra frustrating."

"But I'm feeling good now, a lot stronger than before and it's just a question of getting my match sharpness back now. That is the most important thing."

Pro-Cassano jersey on sale

INTERNET, undated

The jersey worn by a fan of Antonio Cassano as he stormed onto the pitch during a game of the Italian national team is to be auctioned this week on the internet to benefit a non-profit organization. Mario Ferri, 22, was blocked by police on Saturday and charged with disturbing the Italy-Netherlands friendly after he briefly interrupted the game in Pescara.

Ferri donated the jersey - bearing a Superman logo and the words "Cassano in Nazionale" - to a benefit organization founded by AC Milan defender and world champion Massimo Oddo with two associates.

AMO, an acronym for Associazione Massimo Oddo - but also meaning "I love" - will auction the jersey on eBay.

The association has already sold other items on eBay - mostly sports apparel - donated by footballers who wanted to help Oddo in his fund-raising efforts, which largely focus on education and social assistance in Italy and abroad.

The money from the pro-Cassano jersey is to help the reconstruction of a soup kitchen in the town of L'Aquila, where hundreds of buildings were destroyed in an earthquake on April 6.

Although played down by Italy's coach Marcello Lippi, the pitch invasion found support by other fans holding banners praising the in-form Sampdoria forward, whom Lippi appears set on not taking to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Lahm will lead Germany

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich defender Philipp Lahm will captain Germany in Wednesday's friendly against the Ivory Coast as the national side look to build for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

With captain Michael Ballack out of the game with a knee injury, Bayern's vice-captain Lahm will lead the side as the 26-year-old picks up his 63rd cap.

Having sealed their qualification for next year's World Cup with an impressive 1-0 win over Russia in Moscow last month, Germany were lacklustre when they drew 1-1 with Finland in their final qualifier.

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PHOTO: AFP
Portugal midfielder Deco (L) is about to receive the ball during a training session in Zenica on Tuesday on the eve of their World Cup playoff against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia to attack like 'hungry wolves'

AFP, Sarajevo

Bosnia-Herzegovina coach Miroslav Blazevic pledged on Monday his team would attack Portugal like 'hungry wolves' in a bid to reach their first World Cup finals, after losing 0-1 in the play-off first leg.

"In the next few days I will have to create such an atmosphere among the players so they attack the Portuguese like hungry wolves," Blazevic said in an interview with the Dnevni Avaz daily published on its website.

"In Zenica we will go for victory," Blazevic said ahead of the play-off second leg to be played in the central Bosnian town on Wednesday.

"We will make such an atmosphere ... and I want that from the first minute we make pressure in which they will not be able to realize what is going on."

The 47-year-old, who led Croatia to third place in the 1998 finals, lamented over the defeat in Lisbon.

"We were playing as equals with one of the best teams in the world and we regret this narrow defeat."

Saturday's match could have been a black night for the star-studded Portuguese side who were saved by the woodwork on three occasions, including twice in the last minute.

Portugal were missing Cristiano Ronaldo, who is recovering from an ankle injury.

Benitez's Torres ultimatum

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has insisted he will leave Anfield if striker Fernando Torres is sold without his consent.

The Merseysiders' debts have led to speculation about what American co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett would do if a big-money offer came in for the Premier League club's star forward.

But Benitez told Tuesday's edition of The Times that his fellow Spaniard wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm confident it will never happen," he said. "If it did, I'd resign."

Liverpool's financial position means they cannot currently match the spending of fellow 'Big Four' sides such as Manchester United and Chelsea.

"When we have spent big, normally it's been very good business," Benitez said. "Torres, (Javier) Mascherano, (Pepe) Reina, (Abi) Alonso."

"(Robbie) Keane is a good player but we had to sell him because he was not playing at the level we knew he could play."

"Ryan (Babel) was signed for the future and we are waiting for his improvement. He has to be more consistent."

"With the fringe players, we needed to take a gamble on Bosmans and one, two million-pound players."

"Some of these players have not been good enough for us."

"It is a risk you have to accept when there is not too much money about."

Liverpool are currently seventh in the Premier League table, having lost five games already this season, leading many pundits to predict their challenge for a first English title since 1990 has already evaporated.

And there are concerns the five-times European champions might struggle to qualify for next season's Champions League.

"People are worried," Benitez said. "But the team will improve."

"When we have key players on the pitch we are as good as anyone. We have proved this in the past."

Giants face nervy test

AFP, Paris



Three years ago France beat Portugal in the World Cup semi-final - on

Wednesday both could fail to even reach the 2010 finals as they take narrow leads into their play-off second leg clashes.

France, champions in 1998, hold a 1-0 lead over the Republic of Ireland while Portugal hold the same advantage over Bosnia Herzegovina though the French unlike the Portuguese have the added advantage of it being an away goal.

The other two play-offs see Euro 2008 semifinalists Russia also looking a bit shaky as they take a 2-1 lead to Slovenia while Ukraine - who made the 2006 finals - have everything to play for when they host Euro 2004 champions Greece in Donetsk as they are tied at 0-0.

The French-Irish clash looks likely to be a high-octane affair after the angry exchanges between rival

players at the end of the match in Dublin on Saturday provoked by derogatory remarks by Real Madrid midfielder Lassana Diarra.

"They were disrespectful and anti-Irish," commented Irish midfielder Keith Andrews.

"Everyone knows what (Diarra) said but we don't need those to get ourselves motivated for the match."

The Irish, though, face a mountain of a task to overcome the deficit as they have not beaten a top-ranked side away from home since beating Turkey 3-1 in the Euro '92 qualifiers - which they didn't reach and to be fair the Turks really became a top side from 2000 onwards.

However, their veteran Italian coach Giovanni Trapattoni used another statistic to add evidence to his belief that the men in green can turn it around.

"I have reminded my players that we scored in every one of our away matches in the qualifiers save against Montenegro (including world champions Italy) - a group that was of a better quality

than that of France," said the former Italy national coach.

"Winning 1-0 may be enough as then it goes to extra-time and then penalties," he added.

His France counterpart Raymond Domenech was frank about where he saw the situation lying.

"We have to play, because for me the match begins at 0-0," said the sphinx-like coach, who guided France to the 2006 final but has rarely won over either the fans or the press.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (kick-off times in GMT):

At Donetsk

Ukraine v Greece (1800)

Match level at 0-0

At Zenica

Bosnia Herzegovina v Portugal (1945)

Portugal lead 1-0

At Maribor

Slovenia v Russia (1945)

Russia lead 2-1

At Paris

France v Republic of Ireland (2000)

France lead 1-0

"Our strong point is our ability to score goals. There is no point thinking they are coming here to pose us problems. We have to take the match by the scruff of the neck. Playing to win is the best fashion of doing it."

Bosnia and Portugal's match should be an interesting encounter given that, Bosnian coach Miroslav Blazevic over the eccentric handler - though it worked wonders with Croatia in the 1998 finals when he took them to the semi-finals where they led France before losing 2-1 - has promised some savage entertainment.

Coach Guus Hiddink is optimistic Russia will make it to the 2010 World Cup despite play-off rivals Slovenia grabbing an away goal.

Ukraine star Andrey Shevchenko has warned his teammates to be prepared for a tough battle against Greece.

"We and Greece have a 50-50 chance to reach next year's finals," Shevchenko said.

"In Athens we played very good in defence and, I believe, we could repeat such a performance in Donetsk."

'No room for panic'

AFP, Moscow

Coach Guus Hiddink is optimistic Russia will make it to the 2010 World Cup despite play-off rivals Slovenia grabbing an away goal in Saturday's first leg in Moscow.

Ahead of Wednesday's second leg in Maribor Hiddink said there was no cause for panic.

"Of course, I was disappointed with the result," the Dutchman said.

"We were leading 2-0 and had plenty of chances to increase our advantage."

"But I think there's no need to go from one extreme to another. We did not lose the first match we won it! And there's no room for panic."

"I know that a very tough battle is waiting for us in Slovenia but we gave another proof that we can upset any opposing team regardless of how many goals they allowed in their qualifying group or how dangerous in general they are."

Russia's press praised the country's national squad for their 2-1 first leg win but stressed that such a slim advantage ahead of the return leg match leaves open the fear of missing next year's finals.

George every opportunity to rebuild and revitalise the squad in light of the improved performances in the last two qualifiers against Macedonia and Holland.

"Unfortunately, the adverse results in the two subsequent friendly matches against Japan and Wales provided confirmation that the improvement could not be sustained."

Burley's fate was effectively sealed when the 'Tartan Army' of travelling fans -- who had largely remained loyal to the manager -- reacted furiously to an abject display against the Welsh.

Burley succeeded Alex McLeish as manager of the national team in January 2008. Under his leadership, Scotland won three out of 14 matches and scored in only three of their last 12 matches.

George Burley's 22-month reign as Scotland manager came to an end Monday when the Scottish Football Association (SFA) terminated his contract with immediate effect.

Burley's assistants, Terry Butcher and Paul Hegarty, were also released, 48 hours after Scotland succumbed to a 3-0 defeat by Wales.

The SFA had decided against dismissing Burley last month following a review of the national squad's failure to reach the World Cup qualifying play-offs.

"I should point out that the decision was not a direct consequence of Saturday's unacceptable 3-0 defeat to Wales but, rather, a realisation that the expectations of the supporters, the Scottish FA and George, himself, were not being met."

But Saturday's humiliation in Cardiff proved to be the last straw for SFA chief executive Gordon Smith.

"It is with regret that we announce George Burley's

departure," Smith said. "We now have four months until our next scheduled match, against Czech Republic, and will therefore utilise the intervening period to ensure we attract the best possible replacement to take Scotland forward."

Smith said the decision had been taken unanimously by the SFA's board.

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