

Champs off to Mexico

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spain set off Monday on the long trip to face Mexico in what will be their first international since winning the World Cup for the first time.

La Furia Roja set off for Mexico City, where they are scheduled to play in the Azteca stadium as part of their hosts' bicentenary celebration of independence from Spain.

Wednesday's encounter will see the Spanish lay their new-found prestige on the line as the best side in the world against opponents who made it to the last 16 before bowing to Argentina in South Africa.

And their appetite for further success remains undimmed after adding the world title to their Euro 2008 triumph.

"The fact we have won the World Cup does not mean that we no longer have goals and objectives to achieve," said Athletic Bilbao striker Fernando Llorente.

"We have to carry on as we have been doing with a view to winning as much as possible."

The squad includes 18 of the players who saw off Holland in the final last month although one of those missing will be scorer and Barcelona star Andres Iniesta, who will be rested by coach Vicente del Bosque.

"Though he got through the World Cup fine he does have a slight problem - and we preferred to let him join up with his club (in advance of the new Spanish season) as normal," Del Bosque said last week when he unveiled his squad.

Villarreal's midfielder Bruno Soriano is the new face in the squad as Del Bosque looks at fresh options with a view to Euro 2012.

The Spanish begin their 2012 qualifying programme on September 3 against ultra minnows Liechtenstein.



Spain's star striker David Villa (R) autographs a fan's jersey after his arrival at a hotel in Mexico City on Monday. Spain will play a friendly against Mexico at the Azteca Stadium today.

Bremen deny Ozil rumour

AFP, Bremen

Werder Bremen on Tuesday denied reports that the Bundesliga club have reached agreement with Barcelona for the transfer of their German international Mesut Ozil.

"Reports on an agreement with Barca are false. We have not received any offer," Werder director general Klaus Allofs told the SID sports agency.

Spanish daily El Pais had reported that agreement had been reached in principle for the 21-year-old to join the Spanish champions on a four-year deal worth 10 million euros.

Ozil has been the recent target of clubs including Primera Liga rivals Real Madrid and English clubs Arsenal and Manchester United.

The midfielder, who joined Werder Bremen in January 2008 for 4.25 million euros and was under contract until June 2011 impressed during the World Cup this summer in which Germany finished third.

'Best is yet to come'

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba has warned his best is yet to come as he makes his comeback after groin surgery.

The Ivory Coast forward stepped up his recovery with a 30-minute cameo in the 3-1 Community Shield defeat to Manchester United at Wembley.

The 32-year-old feels the long-standing injury is now in the past, and he can finally show his true skill.

"It was a hernia, and for the last six years I have been struggling with it," said Drogba, who collected the golden boot last season with 29 goals.

"I couldn't really work, it was difficult sometimes for me to play some games. I also had to miss some training sessions.

"Now I am really happy because it has gone and I feel more free. "No more tension in the abductors. You know it is really good for me. I am really happy that I had it (surgery)."

Drogba, who joined Chelsea in a 24-million-pound deal from Marseille in 2004, added: "I learned how to play with it, how to deal with it."

"Sometimes last year I needed some tablets to play. Now I am not even asking. It is a good feeling."

"I had to adapt my game to it, so now maybe I will have to change my game again. I don't know if I can do better than last year, but the things I will feel better, more free in my movements on the pitch."

"I will feel much better and will be happy to have the same season as last year."

FIFA planning refereeing revamp

AFP, Frankfurt

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said Tuesday that world football's governing body were planning a refereeing revamp as he reiterated his reservations concerning the use of goal-line technology.

"The principle work in football now, I already said it before the World Cup, is refereeing," Blatter said on the German Football Federation (DFB) website.

"End October-beginning November, we're going to unveil our project on high level referees. There will be a rejuvenation ... I am for professionalisation, even if there are views against."

He added: "Concerning the help of technical means, it's more complicated. Every system must be studied in detail with a view to an eventual use."

Goal-line technology was forced back onto FIFA's agenda during the World Cup after England's Frank Lampard had a legitimate goal disallowed, while Mexico were aggrieved when Argentinian striker Carlos Tevez was clearly offside when he scored the first goal.

That incident was made worse when a replay was shown on the big screen at the stadium. Blatter later apologised for both incidents.

Loew to decide on captain

AFP, Frankfurt

German coach Joachim Loew will decide next month who between Michael Ballack and Philipp Lahm will captain the team in qualifiers for the 2012 European Championships.

Ballack, Germany captain until the injury that ruled him out of this summer's World Cup, and Lahm, who took the armband and led the Germans to third place in South Africa, are both interested in the role.

Neither Ballack nor Lahm will play in Germany's friendly against Denmark in Copenhagen on Wednesday, and Loew was keen to play down the debate over the duo.

"This issue excites the media and pundits more than it does me," he said. "I've got nothing to say on the matter because it's got nothing to do with the current Germany team."

Loew added that he would "have talks with the interested parties".

"We'll have a serious discussion, I'll let them know what I think, I'll listen to them and then I'll make my decision."

Germany, runners-up at Euro 2008, will kick off their campaign for the 2012 championships in Poland and Ukraine against Belgium on September 3.

Also making up Group A are Austria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkey.

Argentina aim to rebound

Football

AFP, Dublin

Argentina will be desperate to take out their World Cup anger on the Republic of Ireland in Wednesday's friendly in Dublin, according to Giovanni Trapattoni.

Trapattoni's Ireland will provide the opposition for Argentina's first game since their shock 4-0 quarterfinal defeat against Germany in South Africa.

The match, the first soccer international to be played at the Aviva Stadium formerly known as Lansdowne Road, marks the start of Argentina's post-Diego Maradona era.

Maradona was sacked as coach soon after the World Cup and has been replaced by his former international team mate and under-20 boss, Sergio Batista.

Though speculation has continued that Maradona may yet return to management, the man who will definitely be in the Irish dugout, Italian veteran Trapattoni, believes the Argentina players will be desperate to return to winning ways with or without him.

"I think Maradona selected the play-

ers, this is his selection and with (Carlos) Tevez, with (Diego) Milito, (Javier) Mascherano and (Angel) Di Maria, I think the spirit is there," Trapattoni said.

"I am sure this team will play with a bite. They'll be looking for a win. They don't like to lose. They will be angry after what happened in South Africa."

"I think they will be hungry because I thought they were one of the three or four teams that could have won the World Cup and after this disappointment, I said to the players we have to expect a hard game."

Argentina, who will stay in Co. Kildare's Carton House resort for the duration of their visit to Ireland, have named their star players for the friendly, with Leo Messi, Tevez, Mascherano and Gonzalo Higuain in the squad.

Manchester City striker Tevez will hope to rediscover his goalscoring form, but club team mate and Ireland goalkeeper Shay Given is looking forward to trying to stop him.

"He's a bubbly guy, and I think he knows more English than he lets on, he pretends he doesn't understand sometimes," joked Given. "But to be honest he's a really good guy."

Though Given will be pleased to see

Tevez, he's disappointed Maradona won't be present.

"Diego's a legend, someone who everyone bows to, and rightly so because he was a fantastic player, and a bit of a character now he has turned to management," said Given.

"It's a shame he's not there, but Argentina still have many world class players and I'm looking forward to playing against them."

Ireland will be counting on Robbie Keane to get the goals to down Argentina, and Given paid tribute to his Ireland team mate, who will earn his 100th cap on Wednesday.

He said: "Robbie has been huge to Ireland over the years. His goalscoring record at international level stands alongside some of the best players in the world."

"Sometimes we forget that and underestimate how important Robbie is to the team."

"It's a great achievement to get that 100 caps, especially with the occasion of the new stadium, it's history in the making."

"It's great for Robbie as well as he can enjoy it more with it not being a competitive game."

Daniele's political stance

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy midfielder Daniele De Rossi, who was due to captain the national side in their friendly against Ivory Coast in London on Tuesday, has hit out at the Northern League political party.

The Northern League is a group of previously minor regional parties whose ultimate aim is for an independent northern Italy, known as Padania.

They have limited political sway outside the north, although in the last general elections did poll more than eight percent of the national vote, and as much as 27 per cent in Veneto and almost 22 per cent in Lombardy and are part of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government.

Members of the Northern League recently criticised the inclusion of players in the Italy squad who are not of pure Italian blood, such as Brazilian-born Amauri, who only received Italian papers in March, and Mario Balotelli, whose parents are Ghanaian immigrants.

"The decision to select players of other origins is one that concerns only the coach, the Northern League should mind its own business," said AS Roma's De Rossi, who hails from the capital.

"Above all, two months ago (during the World Cup) no-one from the League was supporting us, in fact they were more interested in Paraguay's results."

"It's obvious that Italy has always been related to a sense of belonging but in football all you need to do is look at what happens in Spain and Germany, it's going in this direction."

"And before there was (Argentina-born Mauro)



DANIELE DE ROSSI

Camoranesi and now there's Amauri.

"It doesn't seem to me like there's been a great change and in any case as far as I and my team-mates are concerned, whoever is part of this group will always be well received."

Some members of the Northern League cheered Italy's disastrous World Cup defence in South Africa, where they crashed out in the group stages without winning a game and following a 3-2 defeat to minnows Slovakia.

But De Rossi said that some of his own club's fans reacted in that way and that such behaviour doesn't bother him.

Asked whether Italy's newboy Balotelli, a favourite villain for Roma fans last season, would be jeered if he played for Italy in Rome, De Rossi replied: "Everyone knows that the Roma fans don't like Mario."

"But on the other hand these fans feel more for their

own club than the national team.

"Few of them were disappointed when we were knocked out of the World Cup."

"But I'm different, even if I'm Roman and a Roma fan, I've always been very emotional about Italy."

Italy take on the Africans with a new coach, Cesare Prandelli at the helm and many new faces in his squad.

Prandelli was expected to pick anything up to five uncapped players, including both Balotelli and Amauri, in London.

It is all part of his regeneration plan for the national team which performed so badly in South Africa.

Out have gone the majority of the old guard with many fresh, new faces coming in instead.

In fact only nine of Italy's World Cup squad made it into Prandelli's first 23-man selection, with eight players called up to the squad for the first time.

Wolfsburg after Diego

AFP, Wolfsburg

Wolfsburg have approached Juventus about signing Brazilian Diego, who has failed to shine since his arrival in Serie A, the Bundesliga side confirmed on Tuesday.

Wolfsburg, the 2009 champions and eighth last season, confirmed that general manager Dieter Hoenes visited Turin at the weekend.

"We're not giving any information concerning the topic of discussion," a club spokesman said.

Wolfsburg, coached since July by former England boss Steve McClaren, are ready to spend 16 million euros for the player who spent three seasons in Germany with Werder Bremen (2006-09) before joining Juventus last summer.

Juventus are looking for 18 million euros for a player that they bought for 24.5 million euros.

The Italian club are also ready to exchange Diego and another player for Bosnian Edin Dzeko, the top Bundesliga scorer in 2009-10.

According to the German press, Wolfsburg are also looking at signing Hamburg's Dutch international Eljero Elia.

France need harmony

Football

REUTERS, Oslo

France need to rediscover the fun-factor and get back to playing fan-pleasing soccer to make a quick recovery from their dismal World Cup campaign in South Africa, midfielder Lassana Diarra has said.

Les Bleus flew to Oslo on Tuesday with a largely experimental squad to face Norway in a friendly a day later, their first match under the guidance of new coach Laurent Blanc and their first outing since a shameful exit in South Africa.

"The first thing we need to recapture is the pleasure of being together," Diarra, who was ruled out of the World Cup by illness and is one of the favourites to be named team captain later on Tuesday, told reporters.

"It is also a duty to bring pleasure to those who love this team."

That pleasure was nowhere to be seen in June, where internal squabbling and scandals marred a dismal run from the 1998 world champions, who boycotted a training session after striker Nicolas Anelka was sent home for insulting then coach Raymond Domenech.

Blanc, who replaced Domenech last month

following France's group stage exit, has not picked a single member of the World Cup squad for the Norway match.

"We have to show that we learn fast," Blanc told reporters. "I didn't have the time I would have needed but that is no excuse. We need a result."

Some of the players who took part in the World Cup revolt could be back for Euro 2012 qualifiers against Belarus and Bosnia next month.

Those who will play against Norway, however, know they have a great opportunity to convince Blanc to keep them in the squad.

Of the 22 players called up by the new coach, 13 are without a cap. Others, like Karim Benzema, were overlooked for the World Cup and have a lot to prove.

"There's a new coach, new players, a new spirit," the Real Madrid forward told reporters. "You can say that for me, it's a new start."

Blanc's first squad appears to be built around the 2004 European Under-17 title winning team, a generation featuring Benzema, Samir Nasri, Hatem Ben Arfa and Jeremy Menez, who despite their talent have failed to live up to expectations.

"We must all show what we are capable of," 23-year-old forward Menez said. "A new adventure is starting and there are great things to be done. Our turn has come."



PHOTO: AFP

French players Lassana Diarra (L) and Karim Benzema (C) jog with teammates during a training session in Clairefontaine on Monday ahead of their tonight's friendly against Norway.

AFP, Berlin

German footballing giants Bayern Munich are set to achieve a record turnover of 350 million euros, club president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said Tuesday.

"We're basing this on a turnover exceeding 300m euros for the first time. With the consolidated takings of the Allianz-Arena (Bayern's stadium) that should establish it around 350m," Rummenigge told Focus-Money magazine.

Bayern completed the German league and Cup double last season, but lost the Champions League final to Inter Milan.

The Bavarian club's previous record was 286.6 million euros in 2006-07.

Bayern, who have spent nothing on the transfer market this summer, will make a profit for the 16th consecutive year, Rummenigge said.

"Honestly, the crisis, we know nothing about it," he added.