

# Spain seek more glory

## Football

AFP, Madrid

After a 44-year wait to win a major trophy, Spain have won the European Championship and a first ever World Cup in the space of two years and are now targeting a third successive major title.

Spain begin as bookmakers' favourites to win Euro 2012 on the back of their Euro 2008 triumph and recent World Cup win, but they will have to make history as no team has ever retained the European Championship.

However, the current Spain side have got used to making history, topping the world rankings for the first time in 2008 and then equalling Brazil's 35-match unbeaten run, including 15 straight wins, over a period of 28 months.

Spain also became the first team to win the World Cup after losing their first match, having fallen to a shock 1-0 loss against Switzerland.

Coach Vicente del Bosque said after the World Cup final win over the Netherlands that Spain were still an emerging force and the current, youthful generation could certainly go on to create a dynasty.

"This group is very humble and modest and the World Cup success draws from what we did in 2008," said del Bosque.

"Almost all the players in the current squad will remain available (for the Euro 2012 finals and 2014 World Cup) and there are also younger guys pushing for a place."

Barcelona trio Sergi Busquets, 22, Pedro Rodriguez, 23, and Gerard Pique, 23 -- along with Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas, 23 -- are still at the beginning of their careers, while Andres Iniesta and Fernando Torres, both 26, are reaching their peak.

Liverpool forward Torres, the scorer of the winning goal in the Euro 2008 final, was only half-fit for the 2010 World Cup so, in theory, Spain should be even stronger at Euro 2012.

The world champions still need to qualify but begin the qualifying campaign as strong favourites to win Group I, which also contains the Czech Republic, Scotland, Liechtenstein and Lithuania.

"We must not underestimate anybody," warned del Bosque. "Everybody wants to win and we must be aware that we represent a country that is the world champion."

"We may start the group as favourites, given that we're ranked number one in the world right now, but things can

change once you're on the pitch."

Spain begin with a trip to face minnows Liechtenstein in Vaduz on Friday in their first competitive match since their World Cup triumph in Johannesburg on July 11.

Spain had a flawless qualifying record for the World Cup with a perfect 10 wins and incredibly have only lost twice -- to the United States at the 2009 Confederations Cup and then against Switzerland at the World Cup -- since November 2006.

The world champions have played some marvellous football, with their excellent passing game helping them to dominate opponents, and the only real criticism has been their inability to win games by a bigger margin.

At the World Cup finals Spain were 1-0 specialists, beating Portugal, Paraguay, Germany and the Netherlands by that scoreline in the knockout stages of the competition.

But with Torres back fit to link up with new Barcelona striker David Villa, who top-scored with five goals at the World Cup, Spain should have more firepower as they bid to secure early qualification for 2012 and then try to become the first European side to win three successive major titles.

# Ballack stays captain

## Football

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew confirmed Wednesday that veteran Michael Ballack will remain his first-choice captain despite being left out of their opening Euro 2012 qualifying games.

Ballack, 33, has been dropped for the first two games against Belgium in Brussels on Friday and Azerbaijan at home four days later as he continues his recovery from the ankle injury that kept him out of the World Cup.

With Germany now bidding for a place at Euro 2012, to be held in the Ukraine and Poland, Philipp Lahm will be the temporary national captain until Ballack returns from injury.

In Ballack's absence, Bayern Munich defender Lahm, 26, captained Germany to third in South Africa at the World Cup, sweeping aside England 4-1 and Argentina 4-0 before losing to eventual winners Spain in the semi-finals.

Ballack is expected to return for Euro 2012 qualifiers against Turkey and Kazakhstan in October, but needs to prove his fitness with Bayer Leverkusen in the Bundesliga.

"In the last few days, I have had an open and honest discussion with Michael Ballack, which lasted two hours, and I have decided that he will remain captain," said Loew in a press conference in Frankfurt.

"He has had a long injury break, but I feel he still has plenty to offer this team."

"When he is not available, Philipp Lahm, who did very well at the World Cup, will be captain with Bastian Schweinsteiger as his deputy."

Ballack, who is now back in Germany playing for Leverkusen after his contract at Chelsea expired at the end of last season, has something of a history of clashing with other players, as well as with Loew.

Things have not got off to a flying start for Ballack's return to the Bundesliga as Leverkusen were beaten 6-3 by Moenchengladbach on Sunday -- and Ballack was booed off when he was replaced in the second-half.

Meanwhile, Loew also confirmed Schalke 04 goalkeeper Manuel Neuer will remain between the posts for the national side with Rene Adler and Tim Wiese battling to be the reserve goalkeeper.

"Manuel will remain in goal, but we are in a luxury position with three goalkeepers who all have international experience and in this area, we are very strong," said Loew.

# Juve's 10th new signing

## Football

AFP, Rome

Serie A giants Juventus made their 10th signing since the end of a disappointing campaign last term on Tuesday taking central defender Leandro Rinaudo on loan from Napoli for 600,000 euros.

The 27-year-old - who signed for Napoli from Palermo in 2008 for 4.5million euros - will cost Juventus 5million euros if they take up the option at the end of the loan to buy him.

Juventus finished seventh in Serie A last season only just making the Europa League but have made wholesale recruits since then.

Serbian playmaker Milos Krasic from CSKA Moscow, international defenders Leonardo Bonucci and Marco Motta, midfielder Davide Lanzafame, Italy winger Simone Pepe, forward Jorge Martinez, goalkeeper Marco Storari and Liverpool misfit Alberto Aquilani also joined them.



PHOTO: AFP

Germany players do warm up exercises during a training session in Frankfurt on Tuesday.

# Jose no Harry Potter

AFP, Madrid

Jose Mourinho shrugged off the club's draw in his opening game in charge of Real Madrid and warned fans they need to be patient, saying he is no Harry Potter.

But the Spanish giants' new star coach said he still believes he's the "ideal person" to give Real the "stability" it badly needs. "I'm not Harry Potter," he told the Spanish sports newspaper AS published Wednesday. "He is a magician, but in fact there is no magic... Magic is fiction and I live in football which is real life."

Real signed Mourinho to a lucrative four-year contract this summer to try to stop Barcelona from winning a third successive league crown and help the club improve in Europe, with Madrid having failed to get past the quarterfinal stage of the Champions League since 2004.

The 47-year-old arrived in a blaze of glory after leading Inter Milan last season to the treble of domestic league and cup in Italy as well as the Champions League. That was

after successful terms in charge of Porto, in his native Portugal, and at Chelsea.

But his Real Madrid career began on a low note with a disappointing 0-0 draw at Real Mallorca at the weekend, while arch-rivals Barca thrashed

# Crouch blow for Capello

AFP, London

Fabio Capello suffered another injury blow on Wednesday as Peter Crouch was ruled out of the Euro 2012 qualifiers against Bulgaria and Switzerland with a back injury.

Crouch had been unable to take part in training with Fabio Capello's squad this week after suffering what he thought was a rib injury in Tottenham's defeat against Wigan on Saturday.

The former Liverpool striker has now been told he has a back problem, which is serious enough to force his withdrawal ahead of England's opening qualifier against Bulgaria at Wembley on Friday and the trip to Switzerland on Tuesday.

Racing Santander 3-0.

Mourinho appealed for patience from fans, saying the team was still in a "construction phase."

"Do you know how many training sessions we have had together, including with new signings? Not even 10," he told AS.

But he said that, unlike previous Real coaches, his past success means he is not afraid of taking risks.

"My profile as a coach is different from those Madrid have had in recent years. If things go badly here and I have to go, I will have (another) club the next day..."

"That personal stability that I have allows me to say I'm the ideal person to be in Madrid, because I don't fear anything. Real needs stability and I'm here to give it."

He said he decided to leave Inter to take on the greater challenge of coaching Real.

"If I had wanted to stay in a comfortable situation, living well and with a safety cushion, then I would have stayed on at Inter, the European champions, a team that won it all two years," he told Spanish sports newspaper AS.

# Puyol pulls out with calf injury

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's talismanic defender Carles Puyol has pulled out of the Spain squad which will open its defence of its European title against Liechtenstein later this week due to a calf muscle injury, the Spanish football federation said on Tuesday.

He will be replaced by Osasuna defender Nacho Monreal, it said in a statement posted on its web site. Monreal has just two international caps.

"The player felt discomfort in his left leg during a warm-up before the first training session of the national team at Las Rozas. He immediately reported it to doctors and left from the practice field," the statement said, adding tests showed he had damaged a calf muscle.

World champions Spain play Liechtenstein on Friday in Vaduz in their first Euro 2012 qualifier. They will travel to face Argentina in an international friendly four days later.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain midfielders Cesc Fabregas (L) and Andres Iniesta smile during a training session in Las Rozas yesterday.

# Milan snap up Robinho

## Football

AFP, Rome

Brazilian star Robinho signed for Serie A giants AC Milan on Tuesday on a four-year contract for 18million euros from English Premier League side Manchester City where he had an unhappy two-year spell.

"We paid 18million euros plus bonuses," said club director Adriano Galliani.

The 26-year-old was a shock signing two years ago by City for 32.5million pounds but fell out of favour soon after Roberto Mancini took over as manager last season.

He was loaned out to Brazilian side Santos last January, but the Brazilian club were unable to come up with the money to make it a permanent transfer.

"I am really happy to be here," said Robinho, who won two league titles while at Real Madrid prior to his move to Manchester City where he scored 14 goals in 41 appearances for the English side.

"I am delighted to have been given this opportunity and I want to prove my worth."

"My ambition is to play well and to help Milan regain the scudetto (the title)," added Robinho, who was a much sought after target of Milan president Silvio Berlusconi.

Robinho, who had an impressive World Cup finals scoring twice as Brazil exited in the

quarterfinals at the hands of the Netherlands, is the second big name signing by Milan in the last few days after taking Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic on a one year loan from Barcelona with the option to make it a permanent move at the end of that spell for 24million euros.

Robinho, who starred for Brazil in their 2007 Copa America victory topscoring with six goals, will add to what Ibrahimovic had already described as 'on paper the best strikerforce in the world' with Brazilian duo Ronaldinho and Pato already there.

Milan have spent big as they launch a concerted effort to halt bitter city rivals Inter's recent domination which climaxed with the domestic double - taking their fifth successive league crown - and the Champions League title last season.

Robinho's arrival saw the already unhappy 28-year-old striker Marco Borriello gain himself a move to AS Roma after sporting director Daniele Prade came to Milan for talks with the player, who had slammed the decision to bring Ibrahimovic to the club.

No details of the transfer were revealed for Borriello - scorer of five goals in his 10 international appearances - who found the net 14 times last season.

Also leaving the club was veteran Georgian international defender Kakha Kaladze, as the 31-year-old ended his 10 year spell in Milan by joining Serie A rivals Genoa.

# Zidane boosts France

## Football

AFP, Paris

World Cup winner Zinedine Zidane joined in with 1998 teammate Laurent Blanc's new look France side on Wednesday ahead of Friday's opening Euro 2012 qualifier at home to Belarus.

On paper, the French should be favoured in their group - though they will have to look out for Romania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, their main Group D rivals.

However, such was the humiliation heaped upon the French during a nightmare World Cup this summer that new coach Blanc must start by erasing some of the lingering psychological scars after a first-round exit compounded by a training strike to protest the sending home of Nicolas Anelka.

Banned for 18 matches after his foul-mouthed outburst aimed at former coach Raymond Domenech at half-time during the loss to Mexico, Anelka is unlikely to appear again in the national shirt while skipper Patrice Evra, Jeremy Toulalan and Franck Ribery are suspended owing to their role as strike ring-leaders.

But the mood lightened with Zidane's appearance as he, Blanc and assistants Alain Boghossian and Fabien Barthez attempted to infuse training with a flavour of France's glori-

ous past, when they combined to humble Brazil at Stade de France 12 years ago.

"The main thing is to get back to winning ways - you construct a team through victories," said Zidane.

"I was here for a good cause - Lolo (Blanc) asked me to come and spend the day with this new team and I am happy to be here and pass on my experiences," Zidane added.

"But I did not make any speeches - I am not here for that. We spoke of renewal and that will come about through winning," said Zidane, who added that the squad had had a look at footage both from the 1998 World Cup and also the successful Euro 2000 campaign.

French fans were generally appalled at the events of the summer - but they were cheering loudly when a shorts-clad Zidane made his appearance to cries of "Zizou!" while some called out "a kiss for Fabien!" - during the 1998 finals in France Blanc would kiss the former keeper's bald pate for luck.

"It's great to get into the swing of things once again," said the former Real Madrid star as he left the field, pausing to sign autographs and shake hands with Aldo Platini, father of former France coach and current UEFA president Michel Platini.

Zidane was later to fly down to Madrid to hand over a cheque for 150,000 euros to a charity helping sufferers of brain disorders of which he is patron.



PHOTO: AFP

France legend Zinedine Zidane (L) obliges young fans during a training session of the French squad in Clairefontaine yesterday.

# UEFA bans vuvuzelas

AFP, Geneva

Vuvuzelas have been banned from UEFA matches, European football's governing body said on Wednesday, as it sided with chanting and singing in Europe's stadiums.

UEFA told its 53 member associations that it had adopted the ban to protect "Europe's football culture and tradition", adding that "the atmosphere at matches would be changed by the sound of the vuvuzela".

"UEFA has decided that vuvuzelas -- the trumpet that came to prominence at games during this summer's FIFA World Cup in South Africa -- may not be brought into stadiums at matches in UEFA competitions," it announced on its website.

The decision takes immediate effect, days before the kick off the Euro 2012 qualifiers and before the main phases of the Champions League and Europa League get under way this month.

Europe's footballing chiefs took exception to the introduction of "a continuous loud background noise", while acknowledging that in South Africa, "the vuvuzela adds a touch of local flavour and folklore".

"The magic of football consists of the two-way exchange of emotions between the pitch and the stands, where the public can transmit a full range of feelings to the players," UEFA claimed.

"However, UEFA is of the view that the vuvuzelas would completely change the atmosphere, drowning supporter emotions and detracting from the experience of the game."

The governing body headed by ex-French international star Michel Platini defended a European footballing tradition of "singing, chanting, etc."

# Spurs seal VDV deal

AFP, London

English Premier League club Tottenham were allowed to sign Rafael van der Vaart from Real Madrid on Wednesday after their last-ditch move for the Dutch playmaker on deadline day.

Spurs boss Harry Redknapp moved for van der Vaart just two hours before the transfer window closed late on Tuesday, causing a frantic scramble to file the paperwork in time, and the north London outfit were left to wait overnight to discover if the Premier League would ratify the deal.

Redknapp was finally able to plan a team that includes van der Vaart on Wednesday after the Premier League rubber-stamped the most impressive deadline day coup by an English club.

"We are delighted to announce that we have reached agreement with Real Madrid for the transfer of Rafael van der Vaart," a statement on Tottenham's website confirmed.

Real confirmed the deal. "Real Madrid and Tottenham Hotspurs have reached a deal to transfer the player Rafael Van der Vaart to the English club," it said in a statement on its website.

"Following the approval of the transfer by the RFEF (Spanish football federation) and the FA, the Premier League has confirmed the player's signing."

Van der Vaart has won 83 caps for Holland, scoring 16 goals, and has played in two European Championships and two World Cups, including this year's tournament in South Africa where he featured five times in his side's run to the final.

The 27-year-old was available at a cut-price rate after new Real Madrid manager Jose Mourinho decided to cash in on a player who would have struggled to win a first-team place ahead of the likes of Kaka, Mesut Ozil and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Redknapp believes he has landed a bargain and, speaking before the move was completed, he said: "He is available now for about eight million. He is a quality player. He is a Dutch international and a great footballer."

"For that sort of money, he is a top player and he will improve us for sure. It's a last minute job."

On the attributes van der Vaart will bring to Tottenham, Redknapp said: "He is a great passer of the ball, he is a top footballer. He will join in here and play the way we like to play, he would be a big plus for us."

Real signed van der Vaart from Bundesliga side Hamburg on a five-year contract in 2008 in a deal reportedly worth 13 million euros.