



PHOTO: REUTERS

**DEFEAT TASTES BITTER:** French captain Florent Malouda falls to the ground in despair after their shock 1-0 defeat to Belarus in their Euro 2012 qualifier in Saint-Denis on Friday.

## Emphatic England

AFP, London



Fabio Capello was left purring with pleasure on Friday after witnessing a welcome return to form for Wayne Rooney as the England talisman orchestrated an emphatic defeat of Bulgaria.

The revitalised Manchester United striker revelled in a free role behind Jermain Defoe, helping his strike partner bag a hat-trick in a 4-0 rout of England's Group G opponents at Wembley.

It was in stark contrast to Rooney's miserable series of displays throughout the World Cup, where he proved to be one of the biggest disappointments of England's misfiring campaign.

But where a clearly frustrated Rooney had looked desperately short of peak fitness and form in South Africa, Friday saw him back to somewhere close to his best, dropping deep and demanding to be involved.

"I spoke with him before the game," Capello revealed afterwards. "I knew a lot about Bulgaria's system."

"I told Rooney to stay just in front of the two central midfielders and from this position to go forward, to be free, to pass more balls."

Rooney was directly involved in all three of Defoe's goals and also had a hand in substitute Adam Johnson's late strike.

It took Rooney just three minutes to make his mark at Wembley as he helped win possession, then unfurled a sublime chipped pass to Ashley Cole, who crossed for Jermain Defoe to fire England into the lead.

There was a more determined look about Rooney as he harried Bulgarian defenders and

dropped deep to get on the ball and influence the tempo of England's play.

His positive mood was reflected by Capello, so often an agitated figure in South Africa.

A miscontrol by Rooney that gave possession back to Bulgaria was the kind of sloppy mistake that would have drawn a furious response from Capello during the World Cup but, keen to keep the mood upbeat, the Italian just clapped encouragingly.

Rooney went close to increasing his team's lead early in the second half with a clever chip from outside the area that Nikolay Mihaylov pushed over the bar.

It was no surprise that Rooney was the architect of England's killer second goal when he slipped a pass through for Defoe to drive past Mihaylov.

He provided a third assist with a simple pass to Adam Johnson as the winger netted late on and still had time to lay on Defoe's hat-trick with another perfect through-ball.

No-one was happier than Defoe after benefiting from Rooney's masterclass, saying he believed the duo could now form an effective partnership for England.

"Obviously when you play with a partner it takes a little time to gel. He's a great player," Defoe said. "Like I've said before, if I make the runs I know he'll find me. And he did that tonight."

"When I got the second he said 'Just keep it going and you'll get the third.' It's always nice when you play with a partner like that and he wants you to get a hat-trick. When I got the third he just said 'Well done.'"

"I've always said sometimes it takes time to get things working. In training, we played together all week and it's been very good."

## Argentina await Spain

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

A friendly between world champions Spain and Argentina at the River Plate stadium on Tuesday (2000 GMT) could be the start of a new era in visits from high-profile teams with an eye on the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

The last time there was a wave of visits by the likes of England and the then West Germany was in the build-up to the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the last finals to be held in South America.

An exception was when Franz Beckenbauer brought his young side to Buenos Aires for a friendly in December 1987, a year after Diego Maradona's Argentina had beaten the Germans in the Mexico final and three before exacting revenge in Rome.

Guillermo Tofoni, a FIFA agent who organises Argentina's friendly calendar, said he had a remit to bring top teams to Argentina.

"We're working on that idea with level A national teams, to arrange South American tours including Argentina and Brazil from here to 2014," he told Reuters.

He said he was talking to national team coaches and national association officials to find out how interested they were in such tours given that the World Cup will be played in

Brazil.

Tuesday's friendly, arranged before Spain were crowned world champions in South Africa in July, appears a first step in that direction, reigniting the interest of top sides to visit South America.

Argentine ace Lionel Messi said his Barcelona team mates in the Spanish squad were excited at the prospect of playing in Buenos Aires, where they have requested to train on Sunday and Monday at the legendary Bombonera (chocolate box) stadium, home of Boca Juniors.

With Brazil looking to meet quality opposition at home before their World Cup since they will be deprived of the competitive football provided by the qualifiers, Argentina are hoping for a knock on effect of being included in tours by European sides.

Italy could play in Buenos Aires in June before Argentina host the Copa America.

Since Germany's 1987 visit, the only leading sides to have come to Argentina were Denmark in 1993 when they were European champions and the former Yugoslavia in 1996.

Spain will be Argentina's second opponents since their World Cup elimination by Germany in the quarterfinals in June after which Maradona was not retained as coach.

Under Olympic gold medal coach Sergio Batista, Argentina beat Ireland 1-0 in Dublin last month.

### RESULTS

Belgium 0 **Germany 1** (Klose 51)  
Kazakhstan 0 **Turkey 3** (Turan 24, Hamit Altintop 26, Nihat Kahveci 79)  
Andorra 0 **Russia 2** (Pogrebnyak 14, 64-pen)  
Armenia 0 **Republic of Ireland 1** (Fahey 76)  
**Slovakia 1** (Holosko 90+1) Macedonia 0  
Estonia 1 (Zenjov 31) **Italy 2** (Cassano 60, Bonucci 63)  
Faroe Islands 0 **Serbia 3** (Lazovic 14, Stankovic 18, Zigic 90+1)  
Slovenia 0 **Northern Ireland 1** (C. Evans 70)  
France 0 **Belarus 1** (Kislyak 86)  
Luxembourg 0 **Bosnia-Herzegovina 3** (Ibricic 6, Pjanic 12, Dzeko 16)  
Romania 1 (Stancu 80) Albania 1 (Muzaka 87)  
**Moldova 2** (Suvorov 69, Doros 74) Finland 0  
San Marino 0 **Holland 5** (Kuyt 16-pen, Huntelaar 38, 48, 67, van Nistelrooy 90+1)  
**Sweden 2** (Wernbloom 51, 73) Hungary 0  
Greece 1 (Spiropoulos 72) Georgia 1 (Iashvili 3)  
Latvia 0 **Croatia 3** (Petric 43, Olic 51, Srna 82)  
**England 4** (Defoe 3, 61, 86, Adam Johnson 83) Bulgaria 0  
**Montenegro 1** (Vucinic 30) Wales 0  
Liechtenstein 0 **Spain 4** (Torres 18, 54, Villa 26, Silva 62)  
Lithuania 0 Scotland 0  
Iceland 1 (H. Helguson 38) **Norway 2** (Hangeland 59, Abdellouaou 75)  
Portugal 4 (Almeida 8, Raul Meireles 29, Danny 50, Manuel Fernandes 60)  
Cyprus 4 (Aloneftis 3, Konstantinou 11)

### Benzema fit to face Bosnia

REUTERS, Clairefontaine

Striker Karim Benzema, who missed France's 1-0 defeat by Belarus on Friday with an ankle injury, will be fit to face Bosnia in their next Euro 2012 qualifier on Tuesday in Sarajevo, coach Laurent Blanc said on Saturday.

"Karim participated in a full training session this morning and he will be available," Blanc told a news conference at France's base outside Paris.

Blanc, who replaced Raymond Domenech after the World Cup fiasco, faced a selection headache in attack after strikers Loic Remy and Louis Saha both picked up injuries against Belarus in France's opening Group D match at Stade de France.

The pair were ruled out for Tuesday's match and Blanc decided to call up Olympique Lyon striker Jimmy Briand, the French Football Federation (FFF) said in a statement.

Briand, 25, joined Lyon from Ligue 1 rivals Stade Rennes during the close season. He has four caps for France.

### Swiss call up Padalino

AFP, Geneva

Switzerland coach Ottmar Hitzfeld on Friday called up Sampdoria midfielder Marco Padalino as a late replacement in his squad for the Euro 2012 qualifier against England next week.

Padalino will cover for Bayer Leverkusen's Tranquillo Barnetta, who has come down with flu and is uncertain for Switzerland's crunch first qualifier in Basel on Tuesday, the Swiss football federation said.

Hitzfeld rested several first team players during a friendly against Australia on Friday, after his midfield selection was already undermined by injury.

"I already know my team against England," the experienced German coach said this week.

## Belarus stun France

AFP, Paris



Laurent Blanc refused to press the panic button despite seeing France fall to a dispiriting 1-0 defeat at home to Belarus in their opening Euro 2012 qualifier here on Friday.

With a number of key players unavailable, France struggled to prise open the Belarusian defence and were beaten by an 86th-minute goal from substitute Sergei Kislyak.

It was a bitterly disappointing result for Blanc, who was overseeing his first competitive match since taking over from Raymond Domenech after the World Cup, but he insisted he was not worried.

"No, I'd looked at the number of caps and the number of goals my players had," said Blanc, whose team travels to play Bosnia-Herzegovina on Tuesday.

"We didn't have Karim Benzema (injured), our best goalscorer. We didn't have people who are used to scoring goals for France."

"We'll have to help them to digest this before we go to Bosnia, where a difficult match awaits us," added Blanc, whose side left the pitch to the familiar sound of jeers from the home fans.

The hosts largely controlled the game but there was a palpable lack of creativity in attacking areas that frustrated Blanc's hopes of banishing memories of the World Cup debacle with a rousing performance.

"We've created a sensation," said Belarus coach Bernd Stange.

"The first 10 minutes we started badly, we were a bit scared. But we weren't lucky. We deserve this victory."

With key creative players Yoann Gourcuff, Franck Ribery and Samir Nasri either suspended or injured, Blanc opted for a 4-4-2 system and handed the captain's armband to Chelsea winger Florent Malouda for the first time.

There were 74,000 fans at the Stade de France, despite the anger provoked by events at the World Cup, but the home side began with a timorousness that was perhaps understandable given the lack of international experience in the team.

Malouda and Jeremy Menez, the two wide men, were both guilty of dropping too deep and playing too narrowly, with strikers Guillaume Hoarau and Loic Remy subsequently starved of service.

Set-pieces initially proved more productive territory than the slick football Blanc wants the team to adopt and Remy stooped to head a left-wing corner narrowly wide of the back post in the 17th minute.

Remy was forced off 10 minutes before the break after falling awkwardly and his replacement, Mathieu Valbuena, brought some welcome spark to the French attack.

The presence of an extra attacking midfielder enabled France to establish a foothold in Belarusian territory and Malouda, Menez and the precocious Yann M'Vila all tested goalkeeper Yury Zhevnov with shots from distance.

Belarus defended in numbers and in the meandering dribbles of Alexander Hleb and the forceful running of his younger brother, Vyacheslav, they gave France the occasional discomfiting moment.

Vitali Rodionov could have put the visitors ahead early in the second half but he snatched at the chance and put the ball well wide after ghosting into the penalty area.

Gradually, France imposed themselves sufficiently to keep Belarus penned deep inside their half for long periods.

Malouda headed at Zhevnov, Hoarau rose to head the ball over the bar and Valbuena almost caught Zhevnov off his line with an enterprising lob that the Zenit Saint Petersburg shot-stopper palmed over.

Blanc stiffened his attack by introducing Louis Saha for the disappointing Menez but he only lasted a matter of minutes before succumbing to a thigh injury that saw him replaced by debutant Kevin Gameiro.

It was a cruel blow for the Everton man, and worse was to follow for France when Vyacheslav Hleb darted to the byline before calmly teeing up the unmarked Kislyak to place the ball into the roof of the net.

"It's a hugely disappointing performance," said Blanc.

"We lost Loic and Louis to injury. We have to remobilise for Bosnia. It was already an important match and, with this defeat, it becomes even more important."



PHOTO: AFP

Italy striker Antonio Cassano (R) is ecstatic after scoring against Estonia during their Euro 2012 qualifying clash in Tallinn on Friday.

## Italy turn it around

AFP, Tallinn



Italy coach Cesare Prandelli praised his fledgling team and claimed they were on the right path following their 2-1 win against Estonia.

Italy were far from impressive in their Euro 2012 qualifying Group C opener but they did grind out the victory despite falling behind to Sergei Zenjov's surprise first-half goal.

Antonio Cassano and Leonardo Bonucci hit back after the break to give Italy their first win in eight matches and first of this calendar year.

Prandelli said that his players are slowly developing into a cohesive unit.

"Without a good footing you can't go very far but it was more than just (Andrea) Pirlo and Cassano that pleased me, we're becoming a team," he said.

Prandelli has made sweeping changes since taking over from Marcello Lippi following Italy's disastrous World Cup campaign in South Africa.

Only 10 of his squad travelled to Africa and he has already given six players their debut.

He knows that the team will take time to gel but even so he was dismayed with some of their defending.

"Frankly I thought the mistakes we made on dead balls and counter-attacks were absurd," he moaned.

That lack of concentration was most evident with Estonia's goal as goalkeeper Salvatore Sirigu spilled Konstantin Vassiljev's 35-yard free-kick and all but Mattia Cassani in the Italy defence stood ball-watching as Zenjov drove home the rebound.

"I thought someone's having a laugh," said Prandelli. "I wasn't afraid but I told the players in the changing room (at half-time) to ditch any negative thoughts because we were playing well in general."

"We've rediscovered the ability to play football with courage. These are three points but they're worth a lot more."

Prandelli reserved special praise for forward Antonio Cassano, scorer of the first and architect of their second with a cheeky backheel.

"He's an example for anyone who wants to play for the national team," Prandelli said of the Sampdoria forward whose last Italy goal was at Euro 2004 and who had not been part of a squad for two years before Prandelli took over.

"He fought to get back in the squad and this week he's shown how much the shirt means to him."

Midfielder Daniele De Rossi, who generally had a quiet game, described Cassano as the brightest player in the squad.

"Cassano is important, he's the most talented player. He made the difference and that's what we expect from someone like him," he said.

"I like playing with good players and there's many of them in the national team."

Bonucci said his goal was down to Cassano's invention.

From a Pirlo corner to the near post, Cassano let the ball run between his legs and backheeled it into the danger area where the unmarked Bonucci tapped in from three yards out.

"Cassano did really well to get the ball in the middle on my goal," said Bonucci.

"As for the rest, Antonio's a superstar and he can do these things."

### Jansen out with knee injury

AFP, Berlin

Germany will be without defender Marcell Jansen for Tuesday's Euro 2012 qualifier against Azerbaijan after the left-back injured a knee in the 1-0 win over Belgium.

Jansen came off at half-time in Germany's win in Brussels as they opened their Euro 2012 campaign on Friday night in Group A and the 36-times capped Hamburg star will have a scan to assess the injury on Monday.

### Robinho happy at Milan

AFP, Rome

Former Manchester City striker Robinho said Saturday that he felt at home at new club AC Milan, a team he claimed had "Brazilian blood".

"In Milan I feel like I'm at home. I have some great friends like Dinho, Pato and Thiago Silva," he told the Gazzetta dello sport newspaper.

"The rossonera" has Brazilian blood. You can understand why I'm pleased with the transfer.

"I prefer not to speak about City," said the 26-year-old of his English experience, adding that he dreamt of a Champions League final between Milan and Barcelona.

"They're the two best teams at the moment. Milan has made some good signings. On paper, we're good, but we have to become a team that wins on the pitch."

Milan fans desperate to see the red and black tilt the dominance of city rivals Inter will hope that Robinho, signed for 18 million euros just two years after City had stumped up 42 million, forms a potent strikeforce alongside fellow new signing Zlatan Ibrahimovic of Sweden.

Winner of the Copa America in 2007, in which he was top scorer with six goals, Robinho was champion in Brazil in 2002 and 2004 with Santos, and Spanish champion in 2007 and 2008 with Real Madrid.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain striker David Villa (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Fernando Torres during their Euro 2012 qualifying match at the Rheinpark Stadium on Friday.