



Italy forward Antonio Cassano (R) is challenged by teammate Daniele De Rossi (C) during a training session at the Italian Football Federation technical centre of Coverciano in Florence yesterday.

## Injuries taking a toll

AFP, Paris



Having managed to avoid major mishaps in their opening Euro 2012 qualifiers, the challenge facing Europe's top sides is to sustain their momentum as injuries and other distractions begin to surface.

World and European champions Spain, beaten World Cup finalists the Netherlands, World Cup semifinalists Germany and Italy have all made 100 per cent starts to their bids to reach Lithuania and Ukraine in two years' time.

Spain kicked off their Group I campaign with a 4-0 thrashing of Liechtenstein, but they will face Lithuania on Friday without a number of influential players.

Barcelona playmaker Xavi heads a list of stars including Cesc Fabregas, Pedro Rodriguez, Jesus Navas and Fernando Torres, all of whom played in the World Cup final, to have been ruled out by injury.

Pablo Hernandez and Ariz Aduriz of Spanish league leaders Valencia are among the players to have benefited, with coach Vicente del Bosque having drafted them into his squad for the home game in the western city of Salamanca.

"Xavi is important to the team but there are other players who have the calmness and the confidence to do his job," said centre-back

Carlos Marchena.

Germany, beaten 1-0 by Spain in the World Cup semi-finals, have been hit with similar problems.

Influential midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger has been ruled out of the Group A clash with Turkey in Berlin due to an ankle injury, while skipper Michael Ballack is likely to be out until next year after fracturing his tibia.

"These things happen after a World Cup," coach Joachim Loew told German daily Bild in reference to Schweinsteiger's absence with ligament damage. "The players have only had a short time to prepare for the next season and the risk of getting injury is of course higher."

Germany top the pool after a 1-0 win in Belgium and a 6-1 thrashing of Azerbaijan, but Friday's game is likely to take place in a charged atmosphere due to the high number of Turkish and people of Turkish descent living in Berlin.

Around 30,000 Turkey supporters are expected at the match, and visiting midfielder Hamit Altintop has fanned the flames by criticising Mesut Ozil's motives for choosing to represent Germany despite having Turkish parents.

"If he had opted for Turkey, he would have not played in the World Cup and would not be at Real Madrid," said Altintop, who was born in Germany and plays for Bayern Munich. "It is that simple."

"I knew I would always play for Turkey. I am very, very

grateful to Germany. I have learned a lot and been given a lot of chances.

"But my mother is from Turkey and my father is from Turkey. I am a Turk."

Another player steeling himself to face a hostile crowd is Italy defender Giorgio Chiellini, whose team take on Northern Ireland at Belfast's notoriously raucous Windsor Park.

Victories against Estonia and the Faroe Islands sent the 2006 world champions top of Group C, but Chiellini is anticipating a sterner test in the

FIXTURES	
<b>Friday</b>	Germany v Turkey, Republic of Ireland v Russia, Northern Ireland v Italy, Serbia v Estonia, Moldova v Netherlands, Greece v Latvia, Portugal v Denmark, Czech Republic v Scotland, Spain v Lithuania
<b>Saturday</b>	

forthcoming matches against Northern Ireland and Serbia.

"These are crucial matches. Starting with Ireland, who only just missed out on the World Cup, and they get excited at home," said the Juventus centre-back.

"We have to be ready for a sporting battle. Serbia are more technical but they are two equally difficult matches."

In stark contrast to Spain, Germany and Italy, Portugal have endured a torrid start to their qualifying attempt.

The Euro 2004 finalists drew 4-4 at home to unfancied

Cyprus in their Group H opener before losing 1-0 to Norway, prompting coach Carlos Queiroz to be shown the exit.

They welcome back talisman and captain Cristiano Ronaldo for the visit of Denmark on Friday though, and the mercurial Real Madrid forward says he is ready to come to his country's rescue.

"I feel better and better. I feel confident and ready to help the Selecao," said the former Manchester United star, after netting twice in Real's 6-1 defeat of Deportivo La Coruna at the weekend.

"We're not where we should be. Now there isn't much room for error -- we have to win."

France, like Portugal, began their qualifying bid in underwhelming style when they went down 1-0 at home to Belarus, but they responded by beating chief Group D rivals Bosnia-Herzegovina 2-0 in Sarajevo in their last outing.

Laurent Blanc's men tackle Romania at the Stade de France on Saturday.

The Netherlands visit Moldova in Group E, with Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk having decided to drop Nigel de Jong after the Manchester City player broke the leg of Newcastle's Hatem Ben Arfa in an English Premier League game on Sunday.

England, who won their opening two matches, are not in action until a home game with Group G co-leaders Montenegro next Tuesday.

## Schwarzer best in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer was the big winner at the 2010 Australian Football Awards ceremony in Sydney on Thursday.

The Fulham custodian took the Footballer of the Year title and the Professional Footballers Australia (PFA) Footballer of the Year award.

The FMA Australian International Player of the Year went to Everton midfielder Tim Cahill, as voted by the Australian football media.

The players were at a gala function to receive the awards ahead of Saturday's international friendly against World Cup quarterfinalists Paraguay in Sydney.

The PFA Harry Kewell Medal for the best young player was awarded to former Melbourne Victory goalkeeper Mitch Langerak, now with German Bundesliga club Borussia Dortmund, ahead of Adelaide United's Mathew Leckie and FC Utrecht's Tommy Oar.

## No longer a two-horse race

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo says the Spain's top division is no longer a two-horse race and the club will have to work hard to achieve anything this season.

"Valencia are top of the standings, we don't only have Barca to worry about, so we have to continue working, to continue fighting for the league," he told the Spanish sports newspaper Marca published Thursday.

The Portugal striker scored a double at the weekend which helped his club to a 6-1 win over Deportivo La Coruna, and into third place in the Primera Liga, two points behind Valencia and one ahead of arch-rivals Barcelona.

For the past six seasons, the Spanish league has been won by either Real or Barcelona.

"The goals have given me confidence," said Ronaldo. "When we score and we play well then the confidence grows. I feel better each time, well-prepared to help the team."

"The team showed that it's getting better every time, we are growing and improving in many aspects. We are making a great start to the league."

Ronaldo rejoins his national side on Friday when Portugal faces Denmark in a Euro 2012 qualifier, after missing the two previous games through injury.

Portugal are in second last place in their Group H after a draw at home to Cyprus and a loss to Norway.

"We are hoping for a win on Friday, we are in a difficult situation but we can achieve it," said Ronaldo.

## N Ireland plot upset

AFP, Belfast



AFP, Belfast

Northern Ireland are plotting another ambush as they seek to add Italy's name to the list of high-profile footballing nations who have been beaten at Windsor Park here on Friday.

In recent years the Northern Irish have defeated England and Spain in famous victories at the ramshackle stadium, which boasts one of the smallest capacities in international football at just 14,500.

Northern Ireland are hoping their raucous home support can help them deliver another upset on Friday when they take on former world champions Italy in a Euro 2012 Group C clash.

However, Northern Ireland captain Aaron Hughes has warned his team-mates against complacency as they prepare to face an Italy side entering a period of transition following a disastrous World Cup campaign.

"At home over the last few years we've had some really good results," Fulham defender Hughes said on www.fulhamfc.com.

"The England and Spain games will be talked about for years and we beat a lot of good teams that were ranked higher than us at home."

"Our home form is strong and we should go into the game with plenty of confidence."

"But it would be extremely dangerous to go into the match thinking Italy aren't what they used to be, because the team is full of quality players."

"We face a tough test and we have to do everything we did against Slovenia in the first

game and a little bit more."

Northern Ireland scored an impressive 1-0 away win over Slovenia in their opening match, a result which leaves them three points behind group leaders Italy with a game in hand.

However, Northern Ireland and Rangers midfielder Steve Davis believes the Slovenia result will count for nothing if they are unable to produce a similar performance against the Italians.

"After the Slovenia result there is optimism, but the players certainly won't get carried away," he told the Belfast Telegraph.

"We'll focus on doing everything right and doing everything to our maximum against Italy, otherwise our chances of coming out with a result will decrease."

"There's a great atmosphere at Windsor and we've managed to get some great results in the night games and hopefully that will continue for us, but we can't afford to underestimate Italy."

"It's going to be a really tough game for us to get anything from, but we'll just go out and give it our all and hope that it's enough for us to get something."

Italy centre-back Giorgio Chiellini, meanwhile, believes Northern Ireland will be awkward opponents as Cesare Prandelli's side prepare for a double-header starting in Belfast on Friday and finishing against Serbia in Genoa on Tuesday.

"These are crucial matches. Starting with Ireland, who only just missed out on the World Cup, and they get excited at home," he said.

"We have to be ready for a sporting battle. Serbia are more technical but they are two equally difficult matches."

## Loew wary of Turkey

AFP, Berlin



AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew has admitted he is wary of Turkey.

ahead of Friday's Euro 2012 qualifier and compared Guus Hiddink's side to Bundesliga surprise package Mainz.

Mainz have shocked the German league with seven straight wins to lead the table by showing a strong team spirit and their young players like Andre Schuerrle and Lewis Holtby are becoming household names here.

Likewise, Turkey have won both of their Group A qualifiers so far, are just behind Loew's side at the top of the table and with Dutch coach Hiddink in

charge, they threaten to upset the hosts in the German capital.

"The Turks are rested, they did not play at the 2010 World Cup and have had more time for preparation. Turkey is like Mainz," Loew told German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Germany's World Cup stars - particularly those at defending champions Bayern Munich - are struggling for form in the Bundesliga after the national side finished third in South Africa.

"We feel that our players are still below their potential after the World Cup," admitted Loew.

Loew will be without captain Michael Ballack and playmaker Bastian Schweinsteiger for Friday night, but says he has a good feeling about the match at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

"The match against Turkey is

important for us, but not decisive," said Loew.

"It's an important game, like the ones against Russia which helped us qualify for the 2010 World Cup," said Loew in a press conference.

"This is only the third game of the qualifiers and teams like Belgium and Austria may yet have their say."

Having coached Turkish sides Fenerbahce and Adanaspor, Loew knows Turkey can not be taken lightly and they gave Germany a scare two years ago before losing 3-2 in the Euro 2008 semifinal.

"We beat them at Euro 2008, but on that day they were better than us," admitted Loew.

"This team knows how to move the ball quickly, their football is refined, they have six points, they have confidence and we will have to be at our best to beat them."

Schweinsteiger's place in the midfield is likely to go to Bayern team-mate Toni Kroos, the national coach said in a press conference in Berlin.

The 20-year-old is set to start alongside Real Madrid's Sami Khedira in the heart of the German midfield.

Having missed the Euro 2012 qualifiers against Belgium and Azerbaijan with injury, Manchester City defender Jerome Boateng is likely to start on the left side of the German defence with stand-in captain Philipp Lahm on the right.

Bremen defender Per Mertesacker should partner Bayern's Holger Badstuber at centre-back while Mesut Ozil, Lukas Podolski and Thomas Mueller will lead the attack from the midfield.

Bayern striker Miroslav Klose is set to win his 104th cap, which will make him the fourth most capped German of all time and by-passes Franz Beckenbauer's haul of 103.

Turkey coach Guus Hiddink is likely to start with two Bundesliga players in his side: Dortmund midfielder Nuri Sahin and Bayern Munich's Hamit Altintop.

Galatasaray's Arda Turan will sit out the match after suffering a groin injury in training.

## Messi set to play

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi says he is ready to strut his stuff in Argentina's friendly against Japan on Friday, which could prove crucial to the future of caretaker coach Sergio Batista.

"I've come to Japan to show something in this match," Messi told reporters after training Thursday on the eve of the international before a sold-out crowd at the 64,000-seat Saitama Stadium in Saitama, north of Tokyo.

"Lionel is physically all set to play," Batista said.

"I want him to enjoy the game," the coach added, explaining that he has made Barcelona midfielder Javier Mascherano the captain to let Messi "play without restraint" although the striker wanted the role.

Batista said he was taking nothing for granted, although Argentina have beaten Japan in all of their six previous encounters and stand fifth in the FIFA rankings, 25 places above the hosts.

"I think it's going to be a very tough match as we have seen how Japan develop themselves after the World Cup," he



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina star Lionel Messi takes a shot during a training session at the National Stadium in Tokyo yesterday.

said. "We'll fight seriously even if it's a friendly, because the Argentine national team must win any match."

Batista, who took over from Diego Maradona after Argentina crumbled to Germany in the World Cup quarterfinals, hopes to extend his short-term contract, due to expire in December.

Messi arrived in Tokyo on Wednesday, putting to rest fears he might miss the

international due to a right ankle injury sustained in Barcelona's 2-1 away win over Atletico Madrid in La Liga on September 19.

His trip to Japan has earned the Argentina Football Association a 200,000 dollar bonus.

The Argentina match is former AC Milan boss Alberto Zaccheroni's debut as Japan coach. He signed up in August after the Blue Samurai

reached the last 16 in South Africa in their best World Cup performance ever on foreign soil.

The 57-year-old Italian has managed six Serie A sides but Japan is his first job with a national team or overseas club.

He watched from the stands as his side won two friendlies at home against Paraguay and Guatemala in early September as he had yet to obtain a work visa.

After another friendly away against traditional rivals South Korea on October 12, Zaccheroni will lead Japan to the Asian Cup in January in Qatar, where the three-time champions will try to regain the title they lost in 2007.

Batista will be hoping to maintain his 100 per cent record after his side beat Ireland 1-0 away on August 12 and crushed world champions Spain 4-1 at home on September 7.

The Argentine coach called Japan a "very disciplined" team, praising CSKA Moscow midfielder Keisuke Honda for his "high-level skills."

Japan's squad is missing two World Cup centre backs, Yuji Nakazawa and Brazilian-born Marcus Tulio Tanaka, due to injury.