



England centreback Rio Ferdinand (L) and striker Wayne Rooney jog during a training session at Wembley yesterday on the eve of their Euro 2012 qualifier against push-over-turned-aspirants Montenegro.

# Grand slam beckons Montenegro

REUTERS, London



Montenegro have the chance to complete a Group G grand slam few could have imagined when they face England at Wembley in Euro 2012 qualifying on Tuesday, having already made a mockery of their lowly seeding.

If the surprise package of the qualifiers defeat England, seeded top in Group G, it will be their fourth successive win after 1-0 victories over Wales, Bulgaria and Switzerland -- the fourth, third and second seeds.

Montenegro only became UEFA members in 2007 and were in the fifth seeding pot in February's draw.

Something will have to give at Wembley, with England also defending a hundred percent record.

England appear to have put their woeful World Cup behind them following a 4-0 win over Bulgaria and a 3-1 success in Switzerland and will be hoping Wayne Rooney re-discovers his goalscoring form at Wembley.

Not only has he scored just twice for United and once for England this season, he has also been affected by off-field personal problems and injury.

Rooney, 24, who hopes to win his 68th England cap if fit, told reporters: "In the last two games we seem to have got the shape right and we have started the qualifying campaign well."

"Everybody expects us to do better and the players also expect better performances and results. We need to work out how we can do better than we did in the World Cup. We know

we weren't good enough." With Jermain Defoe injured, Rooney is likely to partner the in-form Darren Bent in attack, though England manager Fabio Capello could also start with Peter Crouch or pull a surprise and give 33-year-old Kevin Davies his international debut.

Whoever starts up front, England need a high tempo approach early on to undermine the Montenegrins' self-confidence, boosted by them being top of the standings.

In defence, Rio Ferdinand is almost certain to return for the first time since his injury before the World Cup. Joleon Lescott is his likely partner at centre-back after John Terry was forced to pull out with a back injury on Sunday.

While England will be under pressure to win well at home, Montenegro arrive at Wembley for the first senior meeting between the countries under relatively little pressure, as they enjoy their best spell since achieving soccer independence.

Mirko Vucinic will be the main danger man for Croatian coach Zlatko Kranjcar, who could get some insight into the England players from his son Niko who plays for Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League.

Before leaving for London he told media: "England are the favourites to win the group but we are not going to London as shopping tourists, we will be looking to prove our worth and get something out of this game."

"This team has the capacity to capitalise on any blunders England might make so we won't just roll over."

Capello is likely to stick to a 4-4-2 formation while Kranjcar may opt for the 4-3-2-1, with Vucinic spearheading the attack, which worked well against the Swiss on Friday.

# Mission: Avoid slip-ups

AFP, Paris



Holders Spain join fellow Euro giants England, Germany and France in hoping to avoid major slip-ups Tuesday following largely positive respective starts to Euro 2012 qualifying.

Having carried on from where they left off in winning a maiden World Cup by taking six points from their opening two fixtures, Vicente Del Bosque's Spain will look to keep that form going against Scotland in Glasgow.

The Scots put everyone behind the ball for much of Friday's match in Prague to frustrate a Czech side who finally prevailed 1-0.

With just the group winners guaranteed a place in the finals in Poland and Ukraine, the three points were hugely important for the Czechs, runners-up at Euro 96 but set for a tough battle with the Spanish to top the group.

Lithuania made Spain sweat Friday before succumbing 3-1 in Salamanca and the latter expect a tough test at Hampden Park.

"We are expecting them to get everything behind the ball and try to hit us on the counter-attack," said Spain midfielder Santi Cazorla.

"They are tough to break down - it can be complicated," added Cazorla.

Spain have some hardened individuals of their own, however, and will be boosted

by the availability of Real Madrid destroyer Xabi Alonso, who missed the Lithuania match with flu.

His knowledge of the full-blooded nature of the British game from his time with Liverpool will enable the Spanish to get to grips rapidly with the physical Scottish style.

Spain are one of seven sides who have maximum points from their qualifiers to date - though they have played just twice.

Four sides can boast a full house from three outings - but few would have expected Montenegro to be one of them.

Single-goal wins over Wales, Bulgaria and Switzerland have propelled the team, which four years ago was still wedded to Serbia, to the top of Group G.

Now, a trip to Wembley beckons - a venue which can hold a sixth of Montenegro's entire population of 320,000.

England are searching for their own third win under Fabio Capello, but the Eastern Europeans will not be in London for the sightseeing.

Montenegro captain Mirko Vucinic has scored against both Rio Ferdinand and John Terry in the Champions League for Roma as well as netting the goal which sank Switzerland in Podgorica last Friday.

Visiting coach Zlatko Kranjcar smells an upset.

"I have told my players we must not go to London to go shopping. We go to England to prove that our results are not just lucky."

Defender Miodrag Dzulovic adds his

side fear nobody.

"We respect England - but we can beat England. We don't fear them and we don't fear Rooney."

The Swiss will meanwhile hope to stay in touch with a home win over Wales.

Another perfect record will go in the Group E meeting between World Cup finalists Holland and Sweden.

The Dutch have won three out of three; the Swedes two from two as both fight it out with Hungary in hot pursuit.

Looking for a fourth win in four are Germany, who should see off a Kazakhstan side coached by German Bernd Stork having flattened Turkey last Friday even if midfielder Mesut Ozil does not get over an ankle injury suffered against the Turks.

Austria can stay in touch with the Germans if they can win in Belgium for a third success.

The Republic of Ireland seek to bounce back from a Group B loss to Russia with a win in Slovakia - likewise two wins from three - while Russia will eye a win in Macedonia as they also target top spot.

Italy, clawing their way back after a terrible World Cup, will consolidate leadership of Group C if they beat Serbia, undone at home by Estonia last week, in Genoa, while fellow summer dunces France, having put Romania in their place at Stade de France, should swat Luxembourg in Metz to stay top of Group D.

In Group H, Portugal will try to close a five-point gap on leaders Norway -- without a game -- by winning in Iceland.

# Terry blow for England

AFP, London

Chelsea defender John Terry was forced late Sunday to pull out of England's Euro 2012 qualifier against Montenegro at Wembley on Tuesday with a back injury, the Football Association announced.

Terry is the third player to withdraw from Fabio Capello's squad in three days after Phil Jagielka and Aaron Lennon also had to cry off with injury.

The combative centre back was a near-certain starter against Eastern European opponents who have won all three of their qualifying matches to date to top Group G ahead of England, who have won their opening two games.

"John Terry has returned to Chelsea this evening with a back injury," an FA statement read.

"Terry was assessed by England medical staff on Sunday and will not be fit to play any part in Tuesday's game against Montenegro."

"No further call-ups will be made at this time."

# De Rossi ruled out

REUTERS, Genoa

Italy midfielder Daniele De Rossi has been ruled out of Tuesday's Euro 2012 qualifier against Serbia with a minor leg muscle injury, the Italian soccer federation said in a statement on Monday.

The combative AS Roma man has been a pivotal part of the Italian side for over four years and his loss will be a blow to coach Cesare Prandelli given the Group C game in Genoa is expected to be physical encounter.

Sampdoria's Angelo Palombo is likely to take De Rossi's place for the game, where a win against the struggling Serbs would keep Italy top with 10 points from four games.

Prandelli said he would not be making huge changes despite Friday's 0-0 draw in Northern Ireland but training sessions suggest he may switch his formation from 4-3-3 to 4-3-1-2 with Giampaolo Pazzini partnering Marco Borriello upfront.

# Scots plan a la France

AFP, Glasgow



Scotland face their sternest test yet in their quest to qualify for Euro 2012 when World Cup holders Spain visit Hampden on Tuesday.

The World and European champions top Group I with maximum points after two games thanks to a 3-1 win over Lithuania on Friday while Scotland slumped to a 1-0 loss to the Czech Republic in Prague.

However, Scotland captain Darren Fletcher says his team have the potential to spring a surprise in their clash in Glasgow and pointed to their wins over France in their qualification campaign for Euro 2008 as evidence of what the Scots can do against the top sides.

The French arrived in Glasgow in October 2006 as runners-up in that summer's World Cup in Germany but went down 1-0 to the Scots, a result that they replicated in Paris the following year.

And Fletcher says Scotland should take inspiration from these results as they attempt to beat the best side in the world.

"We've proved against teams like France that we can do it," the Manchester United midfielder said.

"We're playing against one of the best teams we've seen in a long time. But it's by no means a given."

"We'll go out there and try to get a result. Nobody expects us to get anything but we will try to spring a shock."

"We have to use the France game as an inspira-

tion - we've experienced beating big teams like that."

"Spain will have a lot of possession but I hope we will get chances to take the game to them. The Spanish are not unbeatable - we saw that in the World Cup when Switzerland frustrated them and managed to win."

And Scotland assistant manager Peter Houston has promised Craig Levein's side will adopt a more attacking approach against Spain.

Levein came in for scathing criticism after his side lined up against Group I rivals the Czech Republic in a 4-6-0 formation, and failed to manage a shot on target in the entire 90 minutes on Friday.

Levein is sweating on the fitness of four key players ahead of Tuesday's clash. Tottenham defender Alan Hutton, Wigan's Gary Caldwell, West Brom midfielder Graham Dorrans and Rangers utility man Steven Whittaker all missed training on Sunday as they nursed injuries while Middlesbrough's Barry Robson is suspended.

Spain may be without Liverpool striker Fernando Torres due to injury but his replacement, Fernando Llorente, has warned Scotland he's ready to continue his goal-scoring form at Hampden.

The Athletic Bilbao striker hit a double in their 3-1 win over Lithuania and now Llorente, who has scored six goals in just 11 games for Spain, says he has Scotland in his sights.

"To take over from Torres isn't easy but I have to take this chance," the Spanish striker said.

"We may play with different styles but we both want to score goals. I'm expecting to play and score against Scotland and it will be a great experience to play in Glasgow."

# Criscito fires warning

AFP, Florence

Italy full-back Domenico Criscito on Sunday singled out Serbian forward Milos Krasic as the main threat to the Azzurri in Genoa on Tuesday.

Italy tackle the struggling Serbs in a Euro 2012 Group C clash at the Marassi stadium.

And while the Italians lead the group on seven points from three matches, Serbia are in trouble following Friday's 3-1 reverse at home to minnows Estonia.

But even so, Criscito believes that with Juventus's Krasic in the team, Serbia cannot be taken lightly.

"For me it will be special in front of my fans and in the stadium that launched me and where I've played for five years," said the Genoa left-back.

"Everyone knows about Krasic's quality, he's a great player, very quick and in form."

"He's a real danger. We'll definitely have to double up on him. Apart from anything else he managed to adapt quickly to our football and that's never easy, not everyone can do that."

And Criscito agreed with his coach Cesare Prandelli's assessment that if anything, Serbia's defeat to Estonia would make them more of a threat to Italy.

"It's true they're coming off a defeat to Estonia but this will make them even more motivated and determined," said Criscito.

"However, we won't be any less (motivated and determined). We want to win and we want the three points."

# Big guns fail to fire

Football

AFP, Lagos

African powerhouses Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and Algeria saw their 2012 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying chances dip after under-par performances at the weekend.

Defending champions Egypt were shocked 1-0 by hosts Niger in Niamey and are now bottom of their qualifying group, while Nigeria and Algeria lost in Guinea and Central African Republic, respectively.

The Black Stars of Ghana, who barely three months ago were battling in the quarterfinals of the World Cup, dropped two points after they were held to a goalless draw by Sudan in Kumasi.

Star striker Asamoah Gyan, who missed a rash of chances, saw red for dangerous play in the second half and was sent off.

Seven-time champions Egypt were punished by a slack defending in the first half by Bordeaux striker Moussa Maazou as the Mena of Niger recorded a famous win to throw the West African nation into a massive victory party.

"The players just ignored my instructions and they all did what they wanted," said a disappointed Egypt coach Hassan Shehata.

"I warned them not to underestimate the underdog, but all the same I'm responsible for this loss."

Egypt are now rooted to the bottom of Group G with a point, while South Africa remain top of the standings on four points after they held Sierra Leone to a 0-0 draw in Freetown.

Algeria are also at the bottom of their qualifying group after a late rally gave the hosts Central African Republic a 2-0 win in Bangui.

Late goals by Audin Boutou and Kethoama Therence have shot Central African Republic to the top of their qualifying group with four points.

Morocco beat Tanzania in Dar es Salaam courtesy of a first-half strike by Mounir El Hamdaoui with the host team coach, Jans Poulsen, ruing his team's relative inexperience.

After a late lifting of a FIFA ban, Nigeria

were able to play their Group B tie in Guinea on Sunday.

However, a fifth-minute strike by Italy-based midfielder Kevin Constant gave the Sili Stars maximum points and they now have six points to stay top of their group.

"We paid the price for our casual start. We conceded an early goal but raised our game in the second half but could not come back," said Nigeria caretaker coach Austin Eguavoen.

"All the same, I believe we can beat Ethiopia home and away to get back into contention."

Nigeria and Ethiopia both have three points apiece, while Madagascar are yet to record a point after they fell to a late Ethiopian goal at home Sunday.

Senegal trounced Mauritius 7-0 in Dakar and Malawi were 6-2 winners over bottom team Chad in Blantyre for the biggest winners of the weekend.

Freiburg striker Pappis Cisse grabbed a hat-trick for the Teranga Lions of Senegal, who lead Group F with six points after Cameroon forced visiting DR Congo to a 1-1 draw in Garoua.

Malawi halted a sequence of three draws to move to third place in Group K on six points.

Tunisia snatched a late 2-1 win away in Togo to cut back the lead of surprise Group K leaders Botswana. Botswana have 10 points from four matches, while Tunisia are now two points adrift.

The east African derby between Kenya and Uganda ended in a 0-0 draw in Nairobi with Kenya coach Jacob 'Ghost' Mulee admitting it will now need something special to qualify for the tournament in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

"It is now very tough for us. We need a miracle to qualify after a loss and a draw in our first two matches, said Mulee, who qualified Kenya to their last Nations Cup appearance in 2004.

Action will continue in the five-team Group K in November with Botswana hosting Tunisia and Chad away in Togo, while the third round of the qualifying tournament for the rest of the field resumes in March.

Co-hosts Gabon and Equatorial Guinea will be joined by the overall winners of the 11 groups and three best runners-up.



German players do warm up exercises during a training session in Berlin on Sunday. Germany take on Kazakhstan in their Euro 2012 qualifier at Astana tonight.

PHOTO: AFP