

Portugal get C'Ron boost

AFP, Paris



Portugal will be hoping Cristiano Ronaldo carries his goalscoring form into the international arena when he leads his nation into battle in the Euro

2012 qualifier against Norway on Saturday. The 26-year-old forward netted an incredible 53 goals in 54 appearances for Real Madrid this season, including a record 40 in the league, but missed Portugal's recent friendlies with Finland and Chile through injury.

Norway lead Portugal by three points at the top of Group H, and with only the top side guaranteed a place at next year's finals in Poland and Ukraine, Ronaldo and company can scarcely afford a setback against Egil Olsen's men.

"The objective is to win and go top of the group," said centre-back Bruno Alves. "Norway are a strong team, but we are preparing very well and in the end we will win."

An error from goalkeeper Eduardo gifted Erik Huseklepp the only goal of the game when the sides last met in Oslo in September, in what became Carlos Queiroz's last game in charge of Portugal.

His replacement, Paulo Bento, subsequently oversaw back-to-back 3-1 defeats of both Denmark and Iceland in October that set Portugal's qualifying campaign back on track.

A magisterial 4-0 thrashing of world champions and Iberian rivals Spain in November, meanwhile, went some way towards dissipating memories of the embarrassing 4-4 draw with Cyprus in Portugal's first qualifying match.

"In my opinion, Portugal are the world's best national team at the moment," said Norway coach Olsen.

"They are the favourites, but I am optimistic. We can take a point, and even win. Portugal have to win against us, and that may be to our advantage."

The other Group H match on Saturday

sees Iceland host Denmark, who will finish the weekend level on points with Portugal and Norway if they win in Reykjavik and the home side prevail in Lisbon.

In Group G, England and Montenegro can put clear daylight between themselves and their rivals with wins in their respective home fixtures.

Neck and neck at the group summit on 10 points, England host Switzerland at Wembley while Montenegro take on Bulgaria in Podgorica.

Victories for both table-toppers, who drew 0-0 when they met last October, would allow them to open up a nine-point lead on the third-placed Swiss and fourth-placed Bulgarians with only three games to play.

"We had a good result against them (Switzerland) away early in the qualifiers (a 3-1 win in September) which gave us confidence, but it's all about us and how well prepared, fit and ready that we are," said England midfielder Frank Lampard.

"I think at Wembley, we're going to have a very good chance."

England are missing Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney through suspension, while his club-mate Michael Carrick has been forced to withdraw with a leg injury.

Carrick was unlikely to start, however, as coach Fabio Capello is expected to keep faith with the trio of Lampard, Scott Parker and Jack Wilshere that started the 2-0 win in Wales in March.

Montenegro coach Zlatko Kranjcar is able to welcome back 21-year-old attacker Stevan Jovetic, who only returned to action for Fiorentina last month after suffering serious knee ligament damage in pre-season.

Meanwhile, Russia, Slovakia and the Republic of Ireland enter their Group B fixtures level on 10 points at the top of the pool.

Slovakia host whipping boys Andorra, Russia meet Armenia in Saint Petersburg and Ireland travel to second-bottom Macedonia.



Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo (R) controls the ball during a training session in Praia del Rey yesterday, on the eve of their Euro 2012 qualifier against Norway.

PHOTO: AFP

Spurs snap up Friedel

AFP, London

American goalkeeper Brad Friedel is set to sign a two-year deal with Tottenham as the London club look to bolster their last line of defence following Heurleho Gomes' mitigated season as number one.

At 40 years old Friedel is in the twilight of his career but he is expected to provide competition to Brazilian Gomes, who came under fire after committing a number of costly errors during the season.

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp said: "Brad is a top goalkeeper of real quality who has great experience."

"It is good to have three such experienced top goalkeepers at the club in Gomes, Carlo (Cudicini) and now Brad and it means we have competition for places particularly with the number of games we will hopefully face next year both domestically and in Europe as well."

Italian goalkeeper Cudicini last month signed a contract extension through to the end of next season, while Gomes has been linked with a return to old club PSV Eindhoven.

Gomes has made a number of high-profile mistakes during his time with Spurs.

He fumbled a shot from Cristiano Ronaldo in a Champions League quarter-final defeat to Real Madrid at White Hart Lane in April and in the same month allowed a Frank Lampard shot to squirm away from him, although replays showed the goal should not have been awarded to Chelsea because Gomes was able to retrieve the ball before it crossed the line.

Friedel's contract at Aston Villa was due to expire at the end of the month and no transfer fee will be involved in the deal.

The American has a vast amount of Premier League experience.

He first moved to England in December 1997 when he joined Liverpool from Columbus Crew.

He started 25 league games for the Merseyside club before spending almost eight years at Blackburn. He moved to Villa in July 2008 and in December of that year he broke the record for consecutive top-flight appearances when he lined up for a 167th straight game.

Incredibly he has now extended that record to 275 matches and will be aiming to establish himself as Spurs number one for the new season.

Fabio, Rio make peace

Football

AFP, London

Fabio Capello revealed on Friday that he has finally held clear-the-air talks with Rio Ferdinand over his decision to strip the Manchester United defender of the England captaincy.

Capello caused a storm in March when he failed to speak to Ferdinand to inform him of his surprise move to give the skipper's armband back to John Terry.

The England coach endured a barrage of criticism for his careless handling of a delicate situation as he made an unsuccessful attempt to meet Ferdinand at Old Trafford to speak about the decision.

Ferdinand missed the first two England matches after his demotion due to injury, but the centre-half is back in Capello's squad for their Euro 2012 qualifier against Switzerland at Wembley on Saturday, giving the Italian a chance to make peace with one of his key players at last.

Capello met Ferdinand at the team's plush Grove Hotel on Tuesday evening and insisted an amicable discussion ended with a friendly handshake.

"I spoke especially with him on Tuesday in the evening. I told him what really happened when I decided to make the decision to give the armband to John Terry," Capello said on Friday.

"He told me what he thought in this

period and at the end we shook hands and the relationship is fantastic.

"The relationship is perfect. We spoke personally and privately."

With the Ferdinand situation defused, Capello also answered criticism of his decision to allow his England players to go on holiday in the days leading up to this international week.

After the Premier League season finished on May 22 many of Capello's squad jetted off for sunshine breaks, but the Italian believes the time away from the game has refreshed their minds at the end of a gruelling season.

He even admitted he had to stop training several times this week because his squad were having too much fun.

"They returned happy and I needed to stop the training sometimes because they were too happy," Capello said.

"They were happy to be playing with the ball after one week away. They were playing like children!"

That kind of carefree attitude is a far cry from the boredom that crippled Capello's squad during their World Cup training camp in South Africa and he has learned from that debacle.

If England do qualify for Euro 2012, Capello plans to give his players at least 10 days off before the tournament rather than taking them away for weeks of training and friendly matches.

"If we play the Euros they will go to holiday and after we will start preparations for the Euros," he said.

"I learned a lot at the World Cup, I

learned the players are rather tired at the end of the season and you don't need a lot of games before the first game of a tournament.

"I think being on holiday is good, they recover their focus, their mind energy. It is really important when you have to stay focused for a long time."

They will have a minimum of 10 days or two weeks on holidays. Yes, I trust them to be good, why not?"

Capello, who revealed strikers Peter Crouch and Bobby Zamora were fit for selection after recovering from injuries to train on Friday, insisted he was happy with England's goalkeeper situation despite the international retirement of Ben Foster.

Birmingham star Foster called time on his England career recently, while West Ham goalkeeper Robert Green had to be persuaded to reverse his decision to retire from England duty after a lack of opportunities.

With Blackburn goalkeeper Paul Robinson also ruling himself out, there is a lack of experienced quality back-up for first-choice Joe Hart.

But Capello believes Foster could yet return. "Foster is different because he played for months with a big problem with the finger and he needs to recover this injury," he said.

"He asked to stay home but he still has a future, he is a good keeper."

"Green? He had a few problems but he stays here with the squad because he is happy."



Former Real Madrid and French legend Zinedine Zidane poses with the book entitled "Zidane, the elegance of simple hero" at Bernabeu yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US plot Spain upset

Football

AFP, Foxboro

Reigning World Cup champions Spain will bring a star-studded squad that includes six players from Champions League winners Barcelona into a Saturday friendly against the United States.

Nearly 58,000 tickets have been sold for what will serve as a top-flight tuneup for the Americans ahead of the Gold Cup, the North American championship tournament that begins on Sunday. The host US men open Tuesday against Canada.

"Spain is clearly one of the most talented teams in the world," US coach Bob Bradley said. "We value the opportunity to test ourselves against a team of their quality. We

couldn't ask for a better match to prepare for the Gold Cup."

David Villa, Spain's World Cup 2010 top scorer in South Africa, and Pedro Rodriguez scored for Barcelona in a 3-1 victory over Manchester United in the Champions League final last month.

Andres Iniesta, who netted the winning goal against the Dutch in the 2010 World Cup final, plus Victor Valdes, midfielder Sergio Busquets and defender Gerard Pique are also on Spain's roster after helping Barcelona take the crown.

The Spaniards, in their first friendly on US soil, have a bit of a score to settle with the Americans, who won their most recent meeting 2-0 in 2009 in the semi-finals of the FIFA Confederations Cup at South Africa.

FIFA needs reform

Football

AFP, Sydney

Australia's sports minister said Friday that no government should fund another World Cup bid until FIFA had been subject to external scrutiny.

Senator Mark Arbib was also critical of FIFA's bid process for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup hosts, a process in which Australia was humiliated when it received just one FIFA vote to host the 2022 tournament won by Qatar.

"Seeing what I have seen in terms of the bidding process, and now we hear about collusion between bidding nations, it's pretty clear it wasn't a fair playing field," Arbib told ABC radio.

"And I don't think that any government, knowing what we know, would --

without reform of the FIFA organisation, reform of the bidding process -- no government would want to put funds into any bidding process.

"FIFA need to clean up their game and until they do no government should have confidence in their processes."

Sepp Blatter, 75, was re-elected head of world football on Wednesday after his only rival Asian football chief Mohamed bin Hammam was forced to withdraw amid claims he tried to bribe voters with cash-filled envelopes.

After months of explosive corruption allegations, delegates at FIFA's 61st Congress returned the unopposed Swiss by a landslide of 186 votes out of 203 despite a call for a postponement of the election by England's Football Association.

Australian football's governing

body, the Football Federation Australia (FFA), voted in favour of Blatter's re-election and indicated it supported reform from within.

But the sports minister said an external voice should be heard, in the same way the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did after the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City which were tainted by a votes for bribes scandal.

"I think they (FIFA) need to bring in someone from outside the organisation," Arbib said. "And they need to take action to reform their organisation."

"And certainly the President Sepp Blatter said he would do that yesterday and the football federations around the world need to hold him to account."

"My view is there needs to be significant reform at FIFA, at every level."

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
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What to WATCH

STAR Cricket
England v Sri Lanka
Second Test, Day 2
Live from 4:00
STAR Sports
French Open
Women's Final
Live from 7:00pm

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League
Mohammedan v Soccer Club, Feni
Time: 4:15pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium