

Blanc relishes German test

Football
AFP, Bremen

Germany host France in a pre-Euro 2012 friendly on Wednesday with the Germans missing several first-choice stars and French coach Laurent Blanc relishing playing one of Europe's top teams.

"It is necessary in sport to play the best in order to progress. This is what is most exciting," Blanc told AFP.

"What's the risk? Everyone expects us to take a beating. That is just extra motivation for us."

Germany play France in Bremen and the French have the better record of the 23 matches between the neighbours with ten wins to the hosts' seven and the German's last win over France was back in 1987.

Yet Germany coach Joachim Loew has forged his young team into one of the most feared sides on the continent and the Germans have convincingly beaten Brazil, Argentina, Holland and England in the last two years.

They breezed through their Euro 2012 qualifying campaign with ten consecutive wins, while world and European champions Spain were the only other team to go through the qualifiers unbeaten.

Loew has repeatedly played down expectations from the German public amidst hopes of a fourth European title and after his team hammered Holland 3-0 in their last appearance the previous November, the coach is relaxed.

"The result (against France) will neither spur us on or rob us of self-confidence," said the 52-year-old.

"The development of the team over the last few years, since 2010 in particular, makes me relaxed."

However, the Germans have been weakened by injuries to stars Bastian Schweinsteiger, Lukas Podolski, Per Mertesacker and Mario Goetze, while captain Philipp Lahm also withdrew on Sunday with a knee infection.

In their absence, rising starlets Marco Reus and Andre Schuerrle, of Moenchengladbach and Bayer Leverkusen respectively, are expected to have their chance to shine.

Loew can also rely on Real Madrid midfielders Sami Khedira and Mesut Ozil.



French stars (L-R) Samir Nasri, Franck Ribery, Patrice Evra and Louis Saha jog during a training session at Clairefontaine on Monday. France take on Germany in an international friendly tonight.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mexes given 3-match ban

AFP, Rome

AC Milan defender Philippe Mexes on Monday picked up a three match ban for punching Juventus's Marco Borriello in Saturday's ill-tempered 1-1 draw.

The suspension was confirmed by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) which acted after reviewing video footage of the match which left Milan one point clear of Juve at the top of Serie A.

French centre-back Mexes hit former Roma colleague Borriello in the side early in the second half.

The Milan back was deemed to have acted intentionally and violently by the FIGC.

Milan are considering whether to appeal the suspension.

In contrast two other players escaped censure.

Milan's Ghana international Sulley Muntari was let off for violently shoving Stephan Lichtsteiner while no action was taken against Milan old boy Andrea Pirlo who had been accused of elbowing Mark van Bommel.

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Skrtel best in Slovakia

AFP, Bratislava

Martin Skrtel picked up his second piece of silverware in two days on Monday as the Liverpool central defender was named Slovakian player of the year.

The 27-year-old - who was winning the award for the third time after winning in 2007 and 2008 - beat Napoli attacking midfielder Marek Hamsik and another Italy-based midfielder Juraj Kucka of Genoa in the vote.

Skrtel, who scored in Liverpool's League Cup victory over Cardiff on Sunday ending a six year trophy drought for the English giants, has been at Liverpool since 2008 after four seasons with Russian side Zenit St Petersburg, with whom he won the 2008 UEFA Cup.

Do or die for Korea

AFP, Hong Kong



Former World Cup semifinalists South Korea take on Kuwait on Wednesday in a crucial home clash, seeking to avoid becoming the highest-profile casualty of Asian qualifying for Brazil 2014.

The Koreans are level on 10 points at the top of Group B with Lebanon, who defeated South Korea 2-1 in November in a shock reversal that prompted the sacking of coach Cho Kwang-Rae.

Kuwait are third in the group on eight points ahead of the final round of games in the current qualifying stage.

With the top two in the group going into the final Asian qualifying round, South Korea's 2014 World Cup dream will be over if they lose and Lebanon draw or win away at the United Arab Emirates.

Cho's replacement Choi Kang-Hee spoke of a "crisis" when he named an experienced squad for the match in the

South Korean capital.

He faces a dilemma over his frontline, with the 32-year-old Lee Dong-Gook expected to start but Arsenal striker Park Chu-Young, who has hardly played since his move to London, a major doubt.

Like midfielder Ki Sung-Yueng, who plays in Scotland for Celtic, Park only joined up with the rest of the squad on Monday afternoon.

"I cannot make much of a tactical demand from them as they have not left enough time for training," Choi said of the influential pair.

"But their presence will certainly make my job easier. Now I have to think about how to make the best use of them. I can use Park and Ki as starters or late-game jokers."

South Korea reached the World Cup semis in 2002 when they co-hosted the tournament with Japan, who could give an international debut to their flying Arsenal winger Ryo Miyaichi, who joined Bolton on loan in January.

The reigning Asian champions are

already through to the final qualifying stage and their Italian coach Alberto Zaccheroni said he was eager to see the 19-year-old in action against fellow Group C qualifiers Uzbekistan.

"He has performed at Bolton well in an eye-catching manner. He has a lot of quality and that's why I have called him up," said Zaccheroni.

Of Asia's other major powers, Australia are also already through, but Socceroos skipper Lucas Neill vowed there would be no let-up against Frank Rijkaard's Saudi Arabia, who can still qualify.

Australia are out of reach in Group D, but the Saudis have six points, Oman five and Thailand four, meaning all three are in with a shout of qualifying on what promises to be a nervy evening.

Rijkaard knows his side may not have to win to qualify, depending on the result in Oman, but the Dutchman said they would be gunning for all three points.

"All our ambitions are concentrated on getting a win tomorrow," Rijkaard said.

Balotelli warned

Football
REUTERS, Undated

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli warned Mario Balotelli on Monday that unless the striker stopped getting into disciplinary trouble he risked being left out of their Euro 2012 squad.

Making sure his side conduct themselves in the right manner has been a key element of Prandelli's tenure since taking over after the 2010 World Cup and he has continually omitted players serving club bans.

Manchester City's Balotelli returned from a domestic suspension to score a goal and shine in Saturday's 3-0 Premier League win over Blackburn Rovers but it was not enough to change Prandelli's mind despite Italy having a raft of injured forwards.

"The players know it, acting like this they risk missing the Euros," Prandelli told a news conference ahead of Italy's friendly with United States on Wednesday.

"Enough of this football full of rash reactions and punches, it is a sign of weakness. You can't be in the national squad if you risk leaving the team with 10 men."

Balotelli was banned for kicking out at

Tottenham Hotspur's Scott Parker last month while AS Roma forward Pablo Osvaldo, also left out of Prandelli's squad, was dismissed on Sunday for an off-the-ball incident in the 4-1 loss at Atalanta.

Prandelli said he was also "very upset" that neither player had called him to ask about their exclusion.

With forwards Antonio Cassano and Giuseppe Rossi facing a race to be fit for June's Euros, Prandelli's stance against Balotelli is all the more surprising given the 21-year-old would otherwise be a shoo-in for the tournament in Poland and Ukraine.

Roma's Fabio Borini has received a first call-up as Prandelli plans for group matches against holders Spain, Croatia and Ireland.

Midfielder Daniele De Rossi was dropped from Roma's squad on Sunday for arriving late for a team meeting but has still been called up by Prandelli as his misdemeanour was deemed minor.

Prandelli also said he had "never thought" of stripping the captaincy from Gianluigi Buffon after the Juventus goalkeeper said he would never have owned up to Sulley Muntari's effort crossing the line in AC Milan's 1-1 draw with Juve on Saturday.

Fans love Parker

AFP, London

Spurs midfielder Scott Parker collected his second award in a year on Monday when he was voted England player of the year by the national side's fans.

The 31-year-old - who was named Football Writer's Player of the Year for 2010/11 even in a season that saw his then club West Ham relegated from the Premier League - succeeds Chelsea fullback Ashley Cole.

Parker took 17 per cent of the 15,000 votes cast, with Joe Hart second and Ashley Young third, the FA confirmed on their website.

Parker, who shone early in his career at Charlton and was named young player of the year for the 2003/04 season, made his international breakthrough in the past year as then coach Fabio Capello played him in seven of their nine games to take him to 10 caps in all.

Parker - who missed out on the 2010 World Cup after Capello left him out of the final squad without having played him in either of the warm-up matches - has become so integral to the side that he is being talked about as a rival to Steven Gerrard for the captaincy.

Whoever it is will face their first test on Wednesday against World Cup finalists Holland.

"It's a great honour," said Parker of the award.

Aug friendlies dropped

Football
REUTERS, Warsaw

Europe's leading soccer clubs hailed a 'major breakthrough' on Tuesday after agreeing with UEFA to drop the unpopular August date for international friendlies.

European Clubs Association chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, in an address to the ECA's general assembly in Warsaw, said an agreement had been reached with the European governing body over the removal of the date.

However the German warned that world body FIFA have yet to sanction it and the situation on that front remained unsatisfactory.

Further changes mean that the international calendar will be made up of nine double-headers covering a two-year period with no single friendlies.

In a new Memorandum of Understanding between UEFA and the clubs, they also agreed the two matches of the double-date for friendlies should be played on the same continent.

In future the final tournaments of all confederations shall end mid-July, and players would not be expected to play in more than one international tournament a year.

The ECA, comprising Europe's top 201 clubs, also reached agreement over insurance payments for players injured while on international duty starting at Euro 2012.

It agreed an increase in benefits from UEFA for clubs whose players are involved in Euro 2012 and Euro 2016.

At the moment that fund stands at 55 million euros and the future increases will be announced at the UEFA Congress in Istanbul next month.

With so many more African players now with European clubs, it was agreed that the Africa Cup of Nations should start as early in January as possible when it is staged.

Rummenigge said the agreement was "a major breakthrough for European club football."

"With this agreement, UEFA clearly recognises the importance of clubs and the significant contribution they make to the success of national team football," he added.

"The negotiations have not always proved easy, but were always conducted in a fair and respectful manner."



PHOTO: REUTERS

Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi controls the ball during a training session in Bern on Monday ahead of their international friendly against Switzerland.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Which youngster has impressed you the most in the BPL?

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What to WATCH

Channel 9 & STAR Cricket

BPL T20

Dhaka v Barisal

Final

Live from 6:00pm

NEO Cricket

New Zealand v South Africa

Second ODI

Live from 7:00am

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

DAY'S EVENT

BPL T20

Dhaka v Barisal

Final

Time: 6:00pm

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur

Premier League

Muktijoddha v Mohammedan

Time: 3:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National