

# Gerrard not retiring

AFP, London

England midfielder Steven Gerrard on Thursday ruled out retiring from international football after Euro 2012.

The injury-plagued 31-year-old, who will captain England in Poland and Ukraine, said he wants to prove to new England boss Roy Hodgson that he can continue on until the next World Cup in Brazil.

"I can understand that at my age people are going to start questioning me and asking me if I'm going to quit England and focus on Liverpool, but I don't see it like that," Gerrard told the Daily Mirror.

"I don't think I have a decision to make. I love playing for England, I love playing for Liverpool."

The midfielder admitted however that he must first impress manager Hodgson during the European tournament from June 8 to July 1.

"I think it's going to be a case of let's see how I perform in this tournament," he said. "Let's see if first and foremost I have a future with this manager if he's keen for me to stay about."

"If the manager says to me at the start of next season that he thinks I did well in the tournament, that he wants me to stick about, that he can protect me, not overuse me and that I have a big part to play, I'm sure I will carry on."

"If the England manager says to me that he wants me to stay around for Brazil that would be a nice carrot on the end of the string for me."

"That would be a good tournament for me to bow out at, but there are a lot of things to consider."

"The way I look at it at the moment is my body is in the best shape it's been in for many years. My groin problems are all behind me and I feel strong."



England captain Steven Gerrard attends a training session at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester yesterday ahead of their international friendly against Norway.

PHOTO: AFP

# Spain turn to Alba

AFP, Madrid



The left-back position became a problem for Spain after their 2010 World Cup triumph, but Valencia's Jordi Alba has emerged as the leading candidate to start there for La Roja in Poland and Ukraine.

The problems began when veteran Joan Capdevila, now 34, chose to leave Villarreal for Benfica last summer -- despite his reputation, the former Deportivo stalwart was never in favour in the Portuguese capital, and lost his place in the national squad as a result.

Capdevila was one of La Roja's unsung heroes when they won Euro 2008 and was the only Spain player to start the World Cup final win over the Netherlands that did not play his club football for Real Madrid or Barcelona.

He was also the oldest member of that team, but he may have kept his place in Del Bosque's thoughts had he not lost his way at club level.

Forced to look elsewhere for a solution, Del Bosque overlooked Jose Enrique despite his promising performances for Liverpool, and appeared in no rush to give a new opportunity to Malaga's Nacho Monreal.

The reliable Alvaro Arbeloa filled in at first, but he is better-suited to playing at right-back and so instead the Spain coach turned to Alba.

He duly seized his chance with a superb display in the 3-1 win over Scotland in Alicante last October that allowed La Roja to end their qualifying campaign with a perfect

eight wins from eight games.

He set up the opening goal that night for David Silva and was a constant source of danger down the flank.

Since then, Alba has started in friendlies against England and Venezuela, and in the latter match he set up one of three goals for his Valencia colleague Roberto Soldado.

Now aged 23, Alba is a native of Barcelona who began his career in Barca's youth system.

Deemed not good enough at the Camp Nou, he eventually joined Valencia before impressing on loan at second division side Gimnastic Tarragona in 2008/09.

After returning, he convinced Valencia coach Unai Emery to give him a chance in the first-team at the Mestalla, and was handed his debut in September 2009.

At the time Alba was a left-winger rather than a full-back, but injuries forced Emery to start him in defence and he has since developed into an outstanding modern full-back.

However, his versatility has allowed Emery to use him further forward when necessary.

"Emery has been a really important man in my development -- it is thanks to him that I was given my chance at left-back with Spain," he said after being called up last year. "He showed confidence in me."

At barely 1.72m (5ft 8in) he may be small, but lack of height has not held back established Spain stars such as Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta, Juan Mata and David Silva.

"Jordi Alba has been playing well for a top Spanish side. He is someone who links up well with his teammates, gets forward, has excellent technique and defends correctly. We have confidence in him," says Del Bosque.

# Channel 9 to broadcast Euro 2012

SPORTS REPORTER

Channel 9 has received the rights to show the live telecast of the Euro 2012 which starts from June 8. All 31 matches, including the semifinals and the final, showcasing the 16 participating teams will be broadcast by Channel 9, which will be a first in the private television channel history of Bangladesh.

# UEFA may review rule

REUTERS, Budapest

The Champions League rule which has denied Tottenham Hotspur a place in next season's competition because Chelsea won Saturday's final could be reviewed by UEFA's executive committee, president Michel Platini said on Wednesday.

Chelsea automatically qualified for next season as European champions despite only finishing sixth in the Premier League.

If they had lost on Saturday they would have only qualified for the Europa League, but their victory over Bayern Munich means that they, rather than Spurs who finished fourth in the Premier League, will compete in the Champions League.

Speaking in Budapest ahead of this week's FIFA Congress, Platini said he was aware the rule was unpopular because of the potentially huge Champions League revenue a club can lose because of another's success.

But he told reporters: "Everything can be discussed - the rules, yellow cards, but not during the competition. Perhaps in the next executive committee we can speak about it".

On Tuesday, FIFA president Sepp Blatter questioned whether Chelsea should be allowed to enter next season's Champions League because he said all confederations should follow FIFA's rules on competition winners.

Blatter told Reuters: "We had this rule in FIFA that the winner of the World Cup was automatically qualified and we abandoned it, so the winner of a competition should not be automatically qualified."

# EURO 2012 PREVIEW

## History against Poland

AFP, Warsaw

When they take to home turf in Euro 2012 next month, Poland will be hoping their campaign won't turn sour like previous tournaments which dashed fans' dreams of a revival of a golden age.

The weight of history hangs heavy, as supporters pine for Polish football's come-from-nowhere glory days of Olympic gold in 1972, third place in the 1974 World Cup, Olympic silver in 1976 and a further World Cup third in 1982.

Poland manager Franciszek Smuda is keenly aware that the home crowd wants his generation of players to repeat the feats of forebears such as Zbigniew Boniek.

"Of course there's pressure. There has to be pressure. There'd be pressure whether the tournament was in our country or another country," he said.

"Every fan has demands on this team, just like I do. I'm sure we're going to deal with this," he added.

He has warned against betting on a new era, however, as Poland brace to kick off Euro 2012 against Group A rivals Greece on June 8, then face Russia and the Czech Republic.

"Our goal is to clear our group," said Smuda, acknowledging that Euro 2008 semifinalists Russia look the favourites. "But we're playing at home, so we'll give our all."

Smuda, who took the helm in October 2009 after a flunked World Cup qualifying campaign, has pulled few surprises in naming his 26-man squad, due to be trimmed to the official 23 on May 27.

Nineteen play in foreign leagues.

Among his biggest names are Arsenal goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny, while the sharp end of his strike force is Borussia Dortmund's Robert Lewandowski,

nicknamed "Lewangoalski", who is the Bundesliga's top scorer this season.

Lewandowski forms part of a trio of high-profile Poles at Dortmund, with midfielder Kuba Blaszczykowski, who regularly sports the Poland captain's armband, and defender Lukasz Piszczek both on Smuda's list.

The squad's average age is 25, their relative youth symbolised by 19-year-old Legia Warsaw midfielder Rafal Wolski, set to earn his first-ever senior cap.

"Every tournament uncovers new stars. I think the upcoming edition will reveal two or three from our team. We have a young side, many of whom haven't played at an event of this level," Smuda said.

Over the past decade, Poland have repeatedly raised and then wrecked fans' hopes, with solid qualifying campaigns for the 2002 and 2006 World Cup turning into lacklustre finals performances.

Only 13 of the men on Smuda's list played under his predecessor, Dutchman Leo Beenhakker, Poland's first-ever foreign manager, who was appointed following the

2006 debacle.

"I've picked those players that I've watched and tested over the past two and half years," Smuda said.

Beenhakker became a hero after steering Poland to their first ever European championships in 2008 but saw his star fall when they exited in the group stage and was axed after failing to get them to the 2010 World Cup.

Not reaching South Africa compounded the fact that, like fellow hosts Ukraine, Poland have an automatic berth at Euro 2012.

They have had to rely on friendlies to hone their skills, with patchy results, and will have gone 968 days without a competitive match by the time Euro 2012 kicks off.



# Italy relying on super Mario

AFP, Rome



Mario Balotelli, the temperamental and mercurial Manchester City striker, will have an important role to play for Italy at this year's Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine.

With Villarreal forward Giuseppe Rossi ruled out through injury, the 21-year-old is very likely to get the nod up front over AC Milan's Antonio Cassano in coach Cesare Prandelli's starting line-up.

But Prandelli knows he is taking a risk in picking Balotelli, as Italy seek to bounce back from a disappointing World Cup two years ago and a quarterfinal defeat to eventual winners Spain at the last European championships four years ago.

Whether it was lighting fireworks and setting fire to his bathroom or kicking Tottenham's Scott Parker in the head, Balotelli's frequent indiscretions and haphazard behaviour both on and off the pitch have been well-documented.

And with already one combustible character in the form of Cassano, it might seem reckless to bring along another potentially more explosive element in Balotelli. But Prandelli has little choice.

Italy's current team is a far cry from the



Italy forwards Mario Balotelli (R) and Antonio Cassano look on during a training session ahead of the Euro 2012 at the Italian Football Federation Centre in Coverciano on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

golden generation of the past while its key players, like midfielder Andrea Pirlo and veteran goalkeeper Gialugi Buffon, are coming to the end of their careers.

Most of the squad would largely be described as good, solid professionals rather than world-beating talent.

But Cassano and Balotelli -- for all their unpredictability -- can rightly be called potential world beaters. As a result, Prandelli

knows that leaving either one of them out could starve Italy of vital options up front -- and the trophy.

The coach will need all his management skills to guide both through the tournament without incident, particularly given Balotelli's unenviable record of turning on his team-mates.

In just two seasons at the English Premier League champions, Balotelli has got into

# Joey punished severely

AFP, London



QPR's volatile captain Joey Barton received a 12 match ban from the Football Association on Wednesday after being found guilty by an Independent Commission of two counts of violent conduct.

The 29-year-old - who has been in trouble on several occasions throughout his career both on and off the pitch - had eight matches added to the four game suspension he had picked up already for being sent off in the final game of the season against champions Manchester City.

He was also fined £75,000.

The FA's regulatory panel had discretionary powers to further increase the length of the suspension if charges were found to be proven.

Barton's admission on Twitter that his violent actions were a cynical ploy to provoke a City player to be sent off saw those discretionary powers employed.

Barton insisted via Twitter on the day of his sending-off that he had not lost his head, but that a team-mate "suggested I should try to take 1 of theirs with me".

Barton, who now faces an internal enquiry by QPR into his behaviour, was shown a red card for elbowing Carlos Tevez and then kicked Sergio Aguero before appearing to attempt to headbutt opposing captain Vincent Kompany.

"There are rules of conduct that should be adhered to, and such behaviour tarnishes the image of football in this country, particularly as this match was the pinnacle of the domestic season and watched by millions around the globe," said the Commission chairman Maurice Armstrong.

The FA released a statement saying that while Barton - who appeared personally with a barrister - had pleaded not guilty to the second charge the Commission had not found in his favour.

"This eight-match suspension is to run consecutively to the four-game suspension Barton was already given for his dismissal in the fixture, making a total of 12 matches," read the statement.

"Barton accepted the charge of violent conduct against Aguero but denied the second breach of violent conduct against Kompany. The independent Regulatory Commission, however, found this second charge proved."

QPR said they will now begin their own internal investigation.

# Pizarro set for Bayern return

AFP, Berlin

Peruvian striker Claudio Pizarro, out of contract with Werder Bremen, is poised to sign a one year contract with former club Bayern Munich, it was reported on Thursday.

Pizarro, 33, has already passed a medical and all that is missing for the deal to go through is for him to put pen to paper when he returns from holiday in Peru, German daily Bild announced quoting Bayern's sporting director, Christian Nerlinger.

The Peru international, who played for Bremen between 1999 and 2001 before returning to the club in 2008 following spells at Bayern Munich and Chelsea, finished the 2011/12 campaign as the club's top scorer with 18 goals.

He enjoyed a successful spell at Bayern between 2001 and 2007, helping the Champions League beaten finalists to the Cup and League double in 2003, 2005 and 2006.

Pizarro holds the Bundesliga record for most goals by a foreign player, having found the net 160 times in 333 matches.

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Second Test, Day 1  
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**SET Max**  
Indian Premier League  
Chennai v Delhi  
Second Qualifier  
Live from 8:30pm  
**ESPN**  
Sportscenter India  
Sports News  
Live at 8:30pm  
**TEN Action**  
Copa del Rey  
Athletic Bilbao v Barcelona

**DAY'S EVENT**

**Bangladesh Premier League**  
Sk Russel v Mohammedan  
Time: 6:00pm  
Venue: Bangabandhu