



Portugal super-star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) and teammate Fabio Coentrao do warm up exercise during a training session at the Praia del Rei training camp in Obidos yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Last chance to impress

AFP, Paris



A busy weekend of friendly action will be the final chance for many players to secure a ticket on the plane for Euro 2012 before the UEFA deadline for squad submissions next Tuesday.

Reigning European champions Spain take on Serbia in the Swiss town of St Gallen with a host of fringe players expected to get their chance to impress coach Vicente Del Bosque.

With several integral members of the Spain squad due to play in Friday's Spanish Cup final between Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, the door is open for the likes of Atletico Madrid duo Juanfran and Adrian Lopez, Isco of Malaga and Sevilla striker Alvaro Negredo to stake their claim.

The biggest challenge to Spain's defence of the Euro crown is expected to come from Germany, and Joachim Loew's side are in action on Saturday against Switzerland in Basel.

Four men will have to be dropped from Loew's initial 27-man list next week, so the likes of Borussia Dortmund's Ilkay Gundogan and Schalke's Julian Draxler will know that it is now or never for them.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands -- in Group B at Euro 2012 along with Germany -- host Bulgaria in Amsterdam.

FIXTURES

Ireland v Bosnia-Herzegovina, Denmark v Brazil, Poland v Slovakia, Portugal v Macedonia, Switzerland v Germany, Spain v Serbia, Holland v Bulgaria, Norway v England, Czech Republic v Israel, Greece v Slovenia

Sepp blasts shoot-outs

AFP, Budapest

FIFA president Sepp Blatter on Friday described having penalties to determine the outcome of games as a "tragedy" that ripped the heart out of the game.

"Football can be a tragedy when you go to penalty kicks," he told delegates at the world governing body's annual congress in Budapest. "Football should not go to one-to-one. When it goes to penalty kicks, football loses its essence."

The winners of two major tournaments last season were determined from the penalty spot: the Champions League, where Chelsea beat Bayern Munich 4-3, and the African Cup of Nations, which saw Zambia beat Ivory Coast 8-7.

Blatter challenged Franz Beckenbauer and his Task Force 2014 working group to come up with a solution to the issue.

To hell and back

ATIQUÉ ANAM

When Juventus lifted the Serie A trophy at the Juventus Stadium on Sunday the 13 May 2012, they were not only lifting a trophy symbolizing a league triumph. They were also lifting away the pain and the ignominy that have persecuted the Turin giants for the past six years.

It now seems so far away -- the day that the reigning Italian champions and European powerhouse Juventus were found in the centre of the Calciopoli scandal. Convicted together with the other culprits, they were handed the harshest penalty. Stripped off their two consecutive titles at that period and relegated to a lower tier, Italy's most adored and adorned club overnight became the most tainted and helpless.

The past six years have been a hard grind for the Turin giants. When they were caught out in the scandal, Juventus were domestically dominant and big contenders at the European scene. What the punishments meant was that they would have to climb back to the top tier and would have to wait at least two more years before they could dream of playing in Europe again. The financial losses aside, this was a huge blow to the team and the players alike, who consider European football almost as their right. So as the ship rocked, some jumped, while some stayed back to steady it.

To reaffirm where they belonged, Juventus made it straight back to the Serie A as league winners after the 2006/07 season. After their move back up, they proved that they were almost as good as they were before, finishing third in Serie A, and winning a Champions League berth for next year where they made it to the knockout rounds.

While Juventus were at it, the two Milan giants surged ahead. Even the two Rome stalwarts and clubs like Udinese and Napoli, found new fervour in their title push. On the other hand, Juventus could not sustain the success of the first season because problems at the core were not mended.

So, the Bianconeri struggled. They struggled with the team combination, they struggled with coach's selection and they struggled with overall management of the club.

Then came a pivotal moment when Andrea Agnelli became the president of the club. Changes were brought at the sporting director position, in the coach's position and some valuable summer purchases were made in the transfer window. After a short futile stint with Luigi Del Neri, Agnelli gave way to former Juventus captain and fan-favourite Antonio Conte at the helm. Andrea Pirlo of Milan, although a free agent, proved too lucrative an option not to go for. These two recruitments, together with the unveiling of Juventus's own stadium, proved to be master strokes.

A disciple of 4-4-2 formation, Conte occasionally switched to customary 4-3-3 to fit Pirlo in. And he proved his tactical brilliance as he switched to 3-5-2 to mirror Napoli and Udinese, when the occasion warranted.

The rest is all history. Conte's Juventus won the Serie A title without once getting beaten in 38 matches. Whenever that title or the unbeaten record seemed under threat, someone came out with something special, be it talismanic Del Piero or unfancied Alessandro Matri or the rising star Claudio Marchisio, to defend their cause.

Debate will rage on as to whether this was Juventus's 28th Scudetto or 30th, whether the Juve fans will be able to legally don the three stars on their shirts or will they have to wait a couple of more years for that. But one thing is for sure, Juventus have erased the pain of the Calciopoli and they are back in the big time.



Write in with your views to.
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EURO2012 PREVIEW

Hungry for success

AFP, Prague

The Czech Republic have made it to their fifth straight Euro tournament, hungry for success after renewing the team that now relies largely on players from their home league.

Runners-up at Euro 1996 in England and third at the 2004 edition in Portugal, the Czechs are far from being odds-on favourites at the tournament co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine and starting on June 8.

The team due to be named by coach Michal Bilek will once again rely on Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech, Arsenal midfielder Tomas Rosicky, Bordeaux midfielder Jaroslav Plasil and Galatasaray striker Milan Baros.

These four are all that is left from the 2004 team that stunned Europe with its offensive style before being stopped by ultimate winners Greece in the semifinals.

The rest will be brand new even compared with Euro 2008, where the Czechs, missing an injured Rosicky and retired stars Pavel Nedved, Vladimir Smicer and Karel Poborsky, bowed out after the group stage.

It was a painful revamp as Bilek, now 47, took over the team in 2009, before the Euro 2012 qualifying campaign.

The Czechs got off to a stumbling start with a 1-0 home defeat to Lithuania, then upset fans with two timid performances resulting in losses to group winners Spain.

But they regained momentum in the play-offs, beating Montenegro 2-0 at home and 1-0 away to clinch a Euro berth.

A month before the tournament, the in-form Cech and Rosicky are all but certain to shine -- and seem the only names so far assured of a spot in the squad.

Unlike in 2008, when only two players were recruited

from the Czech league, Bilek's team is expected to largely rely on men plying their trade at home.

In the midfield, the 31-year-old captain Rosicky is set to appear next to players from 2011 title-winners Viktoria Plzen, who became the first Czech club in three years to make the Champions League.

At the end of the qualifying campaign, Plzen wingers Vaclav Pilar and Milan Petrzela consolidated their places in the team along with teammate Daniel Kolar and with Petr Jiracek, sold by Pilsen to Bundesliga club Wolfsburg in the winter.

Plzen defenders Frantisek Rajtoral and David Limbersky are other names to be learnt, together with Slovan Liberec defender Theo Gebre Selassie.

But coach Bilek will have a hard time choosing the defensive line, with Leverkusen's Michal Kadlec and Tomas Sivok of Besiktas being a clear choice and the rest staying open.

Up front, a few questions remain to be answered too, with the ex-Liverpool striker Baros and with CSKA Moscow prodigy Tomas Necid having just recovered from a broken leg.

With Bilek preferring a 4-5-1 system, they may lose their place to Nuremberg's Tomas Pekhart, who has scored nine goals in the Bundesliga so far this season.

Based in the southern Polish city of Wroclaw, not far from the Czech border, the national team will bet on fans clad in red, white and blue shirts and travelling to the city on special trains.

After drawing 1-1 with Ireland in their last friendly in February, the Czechs are facing Israel during a pre-Euro camp in Austria on May 26, before taking on Hungary in Prague on June 1 in the final test.

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Defence key for Roy

AFP, Manchester



England look set to base their Euro 2012 strategy on defensive strength as they prepare to face Norway in what will be new manager Roy Hodgson's first game in charge since taking over from Fabio Capello.

Hodgson, well known for producing teams that are well organised and difficult to beat, has brought in former Manchester United full-back Gary Neville as an extra coach and had his team working on defensive patterns on Thursday ahead of Saturday's friendly fixture in Oslo.

The former Switzerland, Fulham, Inter Milan and West Brom manager has problems up front where Wayne Rooney, who is suspended for the opening two matches of the Euros, is also injured - as is his natural replacement Danny Welbeck.

But with all of England's first-choice defence having won trophies with their clubs this season there is more reason for optimism at the back.

Ashley Cole, John Terry and Gary Cahill won FA Cup and Champions League medals with Chelsea, while Joleon Lescott and goalkeeper Joe Hart won the Premier League with Manchester City.

So no wonder there is a growing feeling

that clean sheets could be more important to England's hopes of progress in Poland and Ukraine than any decision over how to replace Rooney.

"Most of us have had successful seasons so the squad is confident and that can only bode well going into the tournament," said Lescott.

"We've won Premier Leagues and Champions Leagues - and don't forget the Carling Cup as well with Glen Johnson.

"I'd like to think that defence can be our strength. In Joe Hart we have one of the best goalkeepers in the world and if the forward players need to rely on us they can."

England demonstrated their defensive abilities even before Hodgson's arrival when they beat Spain 1-0 in a friendly at Wembley earlier this year, despite surrendering the vast majority of possession to the world and European champions and conceding a string of chances.

Chelsea used similar tactics to overcome Barcelona and Bayern Munich on the way to Champions League victory and Lescott has hinted there could be more of the same when England face France, Sweden and co-hosts Ukraine this summer.

"Not everyone can go and play the Spain way and play them at their own game. You have to play each team individually, look at their strengths and try and beat them accordingly. Chelsea showed that in Barcelona," he said.

Goal-line tech for Eng friendly



AFP, London

Goal-line technology will be tested in an international match for the first time, when England take on Belgium in a Euro 2012 warm-up, FIFA said on Thursday.

The system, developed by British firm Hawk-Eye, will be put through its paces during the match at Wembley on June 2, after a previous trial at an amateur league cup final on England's south coast earlier this month.

FIFA is currently testing two goal-line technology systems - the other is the German GoalRef, which was recently used in two Danish league matches -- with a view to its introduction after a series of high-profile disputed refereeing decisions.

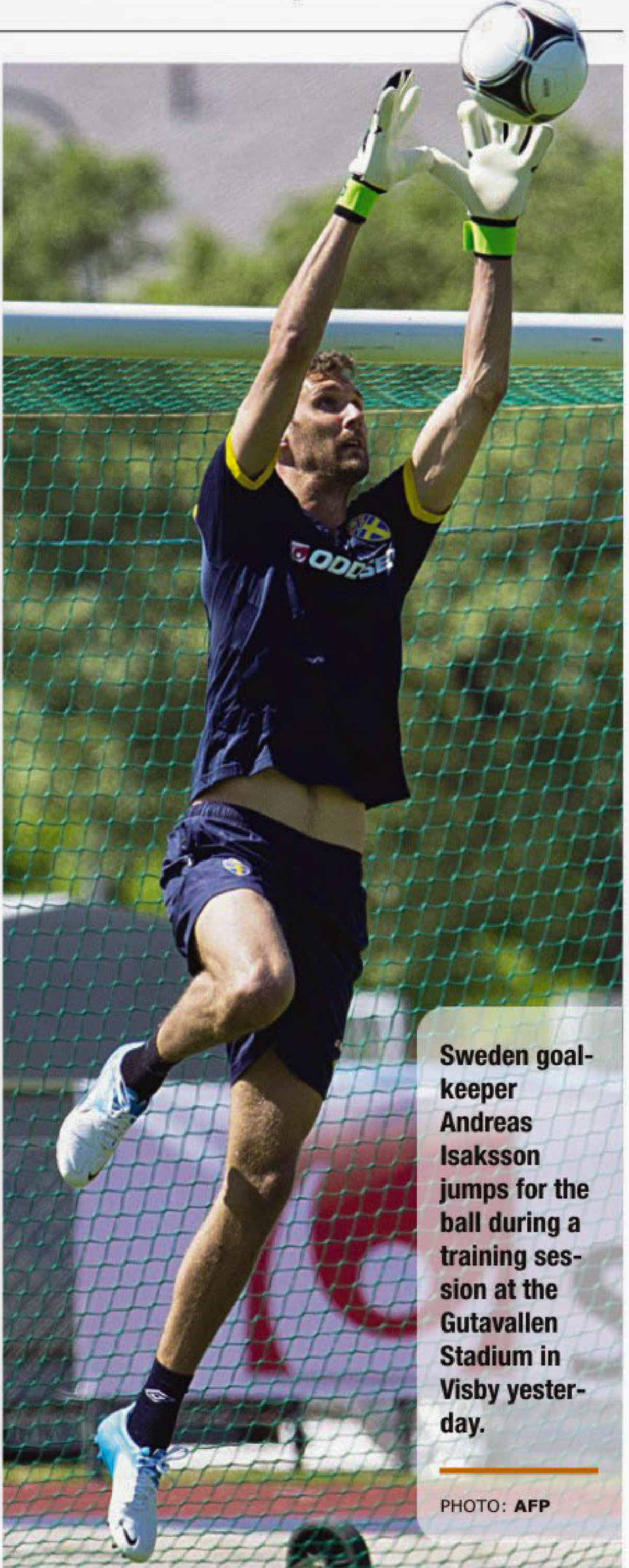
The sport's governing body said that match officials in England's final warm-up game before the tournament in Poland and Ukraine would not use the technology in the event of a goal-line incident.

Instead, it will be monitored by observers, including those from FIFA and its rules body the International Football Association Board (IFAB), which is widely expected to approve the use of the technology when it meets in Kiev in July.

The irony of having goal-line technology at the home of football will not be lost on England -- or Germany -- fans, after Geoff Hurst's disputed goal in the 1966 World Cup final.

Hurst's close-range shot in the first half of extra time at Wembley hit the underside of the bar, bounced down on the line and was cleared.

Hawk-Eye, whose technology is already used to determine disputed line calls in tennis and some leg before wicket referrals in cricket, uses six cameras at each end of a stadium to calculate a three-dimensional position of the football.



Sweden goalkeeper Andreas Isaksson jumps for the ball during a training session at the Gutavallen Stadium in Visby yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP