

# France on track

AFP, Reims



France got their Euro preparations back on track with a convincing 2-0 victory over Serbia here on Thursday.

Les Bleus had toiled to beat the 131st-ranked Icelanders 3-2 on Sunday, with defensive frailties exposed as they fell 2-0 behind before coming back to win the game.

France coach Laurent Blanc insisted that the first friendly ahead of the European Championship in Poland and Ukraine would be about rebuilding fitness and rediscovering rhythm after a short break at the end of the season.

And the second friendly in Reims showed signs that lessons had been learned.

Two goals from Franck Ribery and Florent Malouda in the opening quarter of an hour were enough to see off a largely outclassed Serbian outfit not bound for the Euros.

But Blanc's happy evening was marred by what seemed like a nasty injury to Rennes midfielder Yann M'Vila, linked with an off-season move to Arsenal.

M'Vila had his left ankle turned nastily in the first contact of the match with

Dusan Tadic.

He soldiered on for a couple of minutes but had to be replaced by Alou Diarra, his right shin immediately bandaged on his arrival in the dugout before he was whisked away to hospital by ambulance.

The match was France's first since Blanc announced his final 23-man squad for the Euros, with Lyon playmaker Yoann Gourcuff and Montpellier defender Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa the two men axed from his provisional squad.

And it was two veterans who provided the goals.

In the 11th minute, Ribery kicked off a move down the left wing, injecting pace through to Gael Clichy whose cross was parried back by Serbian goalkeeper Zeljko Brkic to the oncoming Bayern Munich midfielder who had moved to the corner of the penalty area.

The Frenchman mastered the bounce back to hammer the ball past the hapless keeper.

Just four minutes later, Malouda produced a stunning left-foot shot into the corner of the net after the Serbian defence had lost the ball under pressure from Anthony Reveillere 30 metres out from the goalposts.



France star Franck Ribery (L) fights for the ball with Serbia forward Dusan Tadic during their international friendly at the Auguste Delaune Stadium in Reims on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

# R'dinho sues Flamengo

INTERNET, Undated

Ronaldinho's stint with Brazil's most popular club is over after the player decided to sue Flamengo for reportedly \$20 million for unpaid salaries and delayed payments.

Ronaldinho's lawyer Gislaime Nunes said on Thursday a judge ruled in favour of the player's request to have his contract terminated. They want the club to pay everything they claim it owes to the two-time world player of the year in wages and other rights.

"His contract has been terminated," Nunes said. "Flamengo has already been notified. Now we are demanding a very high amount in compensation, of course, which he has the right to receive by contract."

Ronaldinho said suing Flamengo was the last thing he wanted to do but he had no other option.

## EURO2012 PREVIEW

# Looking to make history

AFP, Madrid

Spain head to Euro 2012 looking to make history but their bid for a third consecutive major tournament triumph could be hit by fatigue, with top players feeling the effects of several years competing at the highest level.

Spain were the big underachievers of the European game before their triumph at Euro 2008 but having since gone on to win the 2010 World Cup they will be the team to beat in Poland and Ukraine.

No team has ever retained the Henri Delaunay trophy or won three major tournaments on the bounce, even if West Germany came close, losing the 1976 European Championship to Czechoslovakia after previously winning the 1972 Euros and the 1974 World Cup.

There are plenty of reasons why Vicente Del Bosque's side can hope to go all the way this year, though, especially as their leading players know each other inside out and are not lacking in experience.

They also cruised through qualifying, winning all eight games and scoring 26 goals in the process.

"The entire team know that as the reigning European champions the heavy weight of responsibility lies on our shoulders," Del Bosque said recently.

"But everyone in the team wants to defend our current position in world football even if this task looks tricky. We can be proud of what we have achieved but it belongs in the past and now we need to focus on the future."

However, Del Bosque must solve some major problems if La Roja are to really compete with the youthful exuberance of Germany and the class of the Netherlands, among others.

Chief among those is the fatigue, both physical and mental, which has accumulated over the years of success.

Barcelona's Xavi Hernandez is the man that makes the team tick but he has played an average of almost 70 games a season in the last four years and is being gradually worn down by tendon problems.

And Xavi is far from the only one to have clocked up the kilometres in recent years with little or no rest.

Furthermore, many of Del Bosque's squad will come from Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, the two clubs who meet in the final of the Copa del Rey on May 25, just 16 days before La Roja's opening game against Italy.

That means Del Bosque will be the last coach to have his whole group of players at his disposal ahead of the tournament.

To compound matters, he has also had to deal with the loss of key players to injury.

Inspirational captain Carles Puyol -- a man who "rouses every player that sees him" in the words of one teammate -- is out of the tournament with a knee problem.

Meanwhile, the national team's all-time leading goal-scorer David Villa -- scorer of seven goals in qualifying and five in the World Cup finals in South Africa -- has not played at all since breaking a leg in December.

With Fernando Torres still grasping for a semblance of form, Roberto Soldado and Fernando Llorente could be key in attack, while Sergio Ramos is likely to assume Puyol's role in the heart of the defence.

Despite everything, Xavi hopes the momentum built up in recent years can work to Spain's advantage as they prepare to do battle in Group C against Italy, the Republic of Ireland and Croatia.

"Having a winners' mentality, having just won the World Cup, and the whole world believing in us, that's the big difference," says the 32-year-old.

Spain's place in the pantheon of great sides is already assured. Lift the Henri Delaunay trophy in Kiev on July 1, and they could consider themselves the greatest ever.



# Atalanta hit with new penalty

AFP, Rome

Atalanta have been hit with a new two-point penalty for next season for their role in the ongoing sports-betting, match-fixing scandal known as Calciopoll.

Just under a year ago, then newly-promoted Atalanta were hit with a six-point penalty ahead of the new Serie A season, which has just finished.

But in a new disciplinary process relating to the same match-fixing affair, they have now been given another punishment meaning for the second straight Serie A season they will start with less than zero points.

Atalanta were found guilty of fixing the results of certain matches so punters could make money through sports betting.

Their former captain Cristiano Doni was also hit with another punishment as he was banned for two years, although he retired a year ago after being given a three-and-a-half year ban, which technically he is currently serving.

Both punishments, which included a 25,000-euro fine for Atalanta, were reduced by a plea bargain. Six other teams outside the Italian top flight received point penalties between one and six.

The most severe punishment was handed down to second division Grosseto who were penalised six

# Prandelli ready to pull Italy out

AFP, Rome



Cesare Prandelli says he would have no problem pulling Italy out of the European Championships, which start in a week's time, if that decision was taken to avoid tarnishing the image of the game.

Italy is being dragged through the mire once again due to a match-fixing scandal, in which first choice left-back Domenico Criscito was caught up leading to Prandelli ditching him from his tournament squad.

Since then a pair of Juventus players have also been implicated with centre-back Leonardo Bonucci being accused by a former team-mate of complicity in match-fixing when at Bari.

And now it is goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon who is suspected of illegal betting as reports have emerged that he spent 1.5 million euros over an eight-month period in a tobacco shop in Parma where you can place bets on football.

Neither player was named in the investigation by the Cremona public prosecutor, who issued a search warrant against Criscito and an arrest warrant against Lazio captain Stefano Mauri amongst several others.

But a document has been leaked to the press in which the Turin public prosecutor informs his counterpart in Cremona about Buffon's expenses.

Buffon allegedly made 14 different payments ranging from 50,000-euros to 200,000-euros and totalling 1.585 million euros to Massimo Alfieri, the owner of the tobacco shop.

The document also explains that Buffon's lawyer refused to answer questions about the reasons for such payments, citing the player's privacy as justification.

It has led to rumours that Italy may lose players from the national squad if further leaks or investigations implicate Bonucci and Buffon, or indeed other players, in a more concrete manner.

And if that is the case, Prandelli would have no qualms about his team being removed from Euro 2012.

"If it is decided that for the good of football the national team should not go to the Euros then that wouldn't be a problem," he told RaiSport.

"As far as I'm concerned it wouldn't be a problem, there are more important things."

"I don't like crusades, I like meetings rather than taking a position without thinking about the repercussions."

"I would like to only be talking about football but what is happening is forcing me to do otherwise."

"As for the players, I repeat that those who are involved will not go to the Euros."

"But then if we want to start a crusade let's do so," he added sarcastically.

But Prandelli was quick to defend his players, reminding everyone that they were not among those named in the Cremona public prosecutor's investigation.

"The Juventus players, until it is otherwise proved, have not been subject to any type of notification of investigation (similar to an arrest warrant)."

"(Buffon) is very strong, he has great character and manages to hide uneasy moments."

"But despite this, difficult moments like this one can still weigh on a person like him, even the strongest can be very sensitive."

Italy play their one and only warm-up match on Friday against Russia in Luxembourg before heading to their Krakow tournament base in Poland on Tuesday.

They will play world champions Spain, Ireland and Croatia in Group C.

# Germany rebound

AFP, Leipzig



Germany laboured to a 2-0 friendly win over minnows Israel on Thursday to pick up their first victory in three games and boost flagging confidence ahead of their Euro 2012 campaign.

Having suffered a shock 5-3 defeat to Switzerland in Basel last Saturday, the Germans managed to avoid their third straight defeat of the year, having also lost to France in February, in their final Euro 2012 warm-up match.

A first-half goal from Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez put the hosts ahead before Leverkusen's Andre Schuerrle came off the bench to double the lead eight minutes from time with a superb long-range strike.

But there was little else to cheer German fans on a damp night in Leipzig as the game reflected the gloomy weather.

Having fielded an experimental team in Basel, coach Joachim Loew opted for a side which is more likely to start the opening Euro 2012 game against Portugal on June 9 in Lviv, Ukraine.

Vice-captain Bastian Schweinsteiger, missing his sixth straight international and nursing a calf strain from the Champions League final, was the only noticeable absentee as seven Bayern Munich stars started for Germany.

Schuerrle's club team-mate Toni Kroos slotted into the midfield defensive role alongside Real Madrid's Sami Khedira

as the hosts spent the opening 20 minutes camped in the Israel half.

Gomez tested Israel goalkeeper Ariel Harush early on and defender Jerome Boateng hit the left post with a well-timed shot.

The heavy rain affected the game's tempo and it took a clever pass Khedira which eventually landed at Gomez's feet for the Bayern star to fire home and break the deadlock on 40 minutes.

After the half-time break, Israel coach Eli Gutmann made three changes, including bringing off captain Yossi Benayoun of Chelsea.

It was replacement Gil Vermouth who first tested German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer with a well-timed drive on 54 minutes which the Bayern star had to tip over the crossbar.

It proved to be the wake-up call the Germans needed as Arsenal-bound Lukas Podolski found plenty of space down the left flank and looked increasingly dangerous, before making way for Schuerrle on 66 minutes.

With a quarter of an hour to go, Bayern's Thomas Mueller wasted a golden chance to make it 2-0 when he fired wide with scarce pressure from the tiring guests' defence.

Schuerrle made sure of Germany's win when he unleashed a fierce drive which gave the Israeli goalkeeper little chance on 82 minutes.

But with the Portuguese, World Cup finalists Holland and Denmark awaiting them in Group B, Germany can expect much tougher challenges in Ukraine and Poland.



Germany striker Mario Gomez celebrates his opening goal against Israel during their international friendly in Leipzig on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

# L'pool appoint Rodgers

INTERNET, Undated

Brendan Rodgers said he aimed to bring the glory days back to Liverpool after being appointed the new manager of the former kings of English football on Friday. The 39-year-old Northern Irishman succeeds Anfield great Kenny Dalglish, who was sacked last month after his second spell in charge ended with Liverpool finishing the season a massive 37 points behind Manchester City.

"I'm blessed to be given this opportunity," said Rodgers, who spent two years in charge of Swansea, guiding the Welsh club into the Premier League and last season securing an 11th place finish for the newly promoted side.

Rodgers saw off competition for the post from Wigan manager Roberto Martinez and initially rejected Liverpool when he feared he was merely being included in a 'beauty parade' of candidates without being in pole position.

However, Rodgers said: "Once I had found out I was the number one target from the important people at Liverpool it was quite an easy decision."

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**DAY'S EVENT**  
Premier Div Cricket Super League  
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Venue: BKSP-2  
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Venue: Shaheed Chandu Stadium, Bogra  
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Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium  
Bangladesh Premier League  
Muktijoddha v Brothers Union  
Time: 6:00pm