



More misery for Italy

AFP, Zurich



Russia piled the misery on troubled Italy with a deserved 3-0 victory here Friday in the final Euro 2012 warm-up for both teams.

Having had their only other friendly against Luxembourg cancelled on Tuesday due to an earthquake in the Emilia Romagna region, this was Italy coach Cesare Prandelli's one chance to test his side before the European Championships begin next Friday in Poland and Ukraine.

He had hoped this game could give his team a chance to forget the fall-out from the ugly sports-betting Calciocommesse match-fixing affair going on back home.

But goals from lively Zenit St Petersburg pair Alexander Kerzhakov and Roman Shirokov, with two, condemned the 2006 world champions to a third successive friendly defeat without finding the net and proved they have a lot of work to do if they are just to get out of a group containing Spain, Ireland and Croatia.

Russia came closest to scoring in the first period as their busy forward pairing of Shirokov and Kerzhakov combined, with the latter hitting the post with a low volley.

Kerzhakov had another great chance but Shirokov got in his way as he went to pull the trigger and his effort flew high and wide.

Italy were a whisker away from the lead as Daniele De Rossi got behind the Russian defence after another marvellous ball from Pirlo and crossed for Balotelli but the young forward failed to get a decisive touch under pressure from a defender.

Russia were enjoying the greater number of chances but Konstantin Zyryanov fired wide and Buffon unconvincingly batted away Yuri Zhirkov's effort at his near post.

Pirlo, whose vision had been a delight to behold, sent a free-kick just over the bar as the half came to a close.

PHOTO: AFP

Russia striker Kerzhakov (C) celebrates with teammates Dzagoev (L) and Arshavin after scoring the opening goal against Italy during their international friendly in Zurich on Friday.

Egypt begin WC quest

AFP, Johannesburg



Egypt began a quest to reach the World Cup finals for the first time since 1990 by defeating Mozambique 2-0 Friday at a deserted military stadium in Mediterranean city Alexandria.

While the Pharaohs were achieving a routine victory, 2006 and 2010 qualifiers Ghana overwhelmed little Lesotho 7-0 at home in a match halted temporarily by a power failure soon after half-time.

Defender Mahmoud Fathallah put Group G top seeds Egypt ahead early in the second half and an own goal from goalkeeper Joao Rafael Kapango just past the hour mark sealed the fate of the bottom-seeded Mambas (snakes).

Authorities barred spectators because of political instability in the country since the fall of dictator Hosni Mubarak last year and there has been no domestic football since 74 died in post-match rioting four months ago. This was the first fixture in the other Zim b a w e c l a s h i n Sunday. The out final qualifying stage late next year.

Although Egypt boast a record seven Africa Cup of Nations titles, they have appeared only twice at the World Cup.

New Ghana coach Kwesi Appiah could not have wished for a better start in a tough Group D that includes reigning African champions Zambia and unpredictable Sudan.

Midfielder Sulley Muntari triggered the rout after 15 minutes and there were braces for recalled Dominic Adiyiah and fellow striker Jordan Ayew before two newcomers, midfielder Christian Atsu and defender Jeremiah Akaminko, scored.

Zambia, who eliminated Sudan and Ghana en route to a shock Cup of Nations final triumph over pre-tournament favourites Ivory Coast last February, play in Khartoum Saturday before hosting the Black Stars next weekend.

Hungary stun Czech Republic

REUTERS, Prague

The Czech Republic suffered a 2-1 home defeat by Hungary in their final Euro 2012 warm-up game after Adam Gyurcsó struck a late winner for the visitors on Friday.

The unmarked Gyurcsó latched onto a long-range pass in front of goal and rifled a shot past goalkeeper Petr Czech to claim the victory after the Czechs had dominated possession.

Hungary opened the scoring after just six minutes when Balazs Dzsudzsák's quick free kick from just outside the penalty area caught the Czechs out as they organised their defence.

The hosts, who created several chances, equalised with a Michal Kadlec penalty midway through the first half after forward Milan Baros was dragged down inside the area.

Czech Republic coach Michal Bilek fielded a full strength side except for injured captain Tomas Rosicky, although the midfielder is expected to be fit for the tournament.

The Czechs, semifinalists in 2004 and finalists in 1996, play Russia on June 8 in their opening Group A game before facing former European champions Greece and co-hosts Poland.

EURO2012

PREVIEW

Don't write off Italy

AFP, Rome

For most teams a domestic match-fixing scandal in the run-up to a major tournament would be seen as a damaging diversion. But for Italy it could be a lucky omen.

Six years ago Italy headed to Germany for the World Cup with their domestic game in turmoil.

The infamous "Calciopoli" match-fixing scandal had just broken at the end of the season and involved some of the country's biggest teams.

Juventus, AC Milan, Lazio and Fiorentina were caught up in the affair, meaning many of Italy's World Cup squad would be directly affected by the issue.

Despite that, the team won through to the final and clinched the title after a penalty shoot-out against France.

Italy's previous World Cup win, in Spain in 1982, also came on the back of a match-fixing scandal that saw star striker Paolo Rossi banned but able to return in time to score six goals, winning the Golden Boot and Golden Ball in the process.

None of the players likely to be part of Cesare Prandelli's squad in Poland and Ukraine are affected by the current allegations.

"Calciocommesse" (football betting) is mainly centred on the second tier and although Serie A side Atalanta were punished for their role -- from the season before when they were in Serie B -- they don't currently have anyone in the Italy squad.

Issues of national embarrassment aside, Italy's problems with corruption in football appear to have a unifying effect on the team.

That would be no bad thing with the current batch of players widely regarded as lacking in genuine world class talent.



05
DAYS
TO GO

Great stars of the past such as Alessandro Del Piero, Francesco Totti and Alessandro Nesta are no longer part of the set-up.

Currently, Italy's two greatest talents, Antonio Cassano and Mario Balotelli, are unpredictable firebrands who on their day have the ability to turn matches.

Prandelli knows it is a risk to take either player but given his very average options, he cannot afford not to bring them, as Italy hunt a second European crown.

Italy can at least rely on one of the best goalkeepers in the world in Gianluigi Buffon and in front of him Prandelli will likely choose two from three Juventus centre-backs, Andrea Barzagli, Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini.

Juve had the best defence in Serie A this season and unlike the World Cup two years ago when they also provided the core of the Italy backbone, this time they come into the tournament with confidence having won the league.

Before the tournament in South Africa two years ago, the Juve defence had just conceded a club record number of goals in a season and finished a disappointing seventh.

In midfield Juve will also provide the two crucial elements, most notably a rejuvenated Andrea Pirlo who has been by far the standout performer in Italy this season.

Claudio Marchisio, alongside him, has come of age and his intelligent infiltrations beyond the defence are a feature exploited well by both Juve and Italy.

With Spain in the same group, the Azzurri won't start as favourites. But they can never be discounted. And if either Cassano or Balotelli can produce something special, with Pirlo's probing and their general solidity, it would be wrong to write them off.

SPORTS POLL

Who has been the best player in the IPL?

Gayle 51.3%
Narine 36.3%
de Villiers 5.1%

TOTAL VOTES: 234

WEEKLY QUESTION

Could the Tigers have played other formats before World T20s?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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What to WATCH

TEN Cricket
Sri Lanka v Pakistan
Second T20I
Live from 7:30pm
STAR Sports
MotoGP World Championship
Catalan GP

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Premier League
Farahganj v Rahmatganj
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu

Maradona after Drogba

INTERNET, Undated

Diego Maradona is considering an ambitious move to bring free agent Didier Drogba to AlWasl.

The former Chelsea striker is considering a move to Shanghai Shenhua but the UAE side could hijack the offer.

Manager Maradona said: 'Who in the world would not want Drogba? Every team would love to have such a player in their ranks.'

The Chinese side are willing to pay the Ivorian superstar £300,000-a-week but The Sun report Al Wasl have the resources to match that.

Drogba is hot property in the football world, with Jose Mourinho hoping for a reunion at Real Madrid.

The striker has pledged not to move to another Barclays Premier League team after spending eight years at Stamford Bridge.



PHOTO: AFP

Austria striker Marko Arnautovic (R) fights for the ball with Ukraine midfielder Anatoliy Tymoschuk during their international friendly at the Tivoli Neu Stadium in Innsbruck on Friday.

Ukraine crash to Austria

AFP, Innsbruck



Euro 2012 co-hosts Ukraine suffered a 3-2 defeat by Austria in their friendly match here on Friday.

Forward Marko Arnautovic was the hero of the match scoring twice for Austria with fellow teammate Zlatko Junuzovic opening the scoring early on. Dynamo Kiev's Oleg Gusev was twice on target for Ukraine.

Austria got off to a flying start and went into the lead after just two minutes when Junuzovic fired home a 20-metre free kick.

Ukraine replied positively, pinning the hosts back but to no immediate avail as their attacking line lacked creativity and precision against a steady Austrian defence that yielded nothing in the first 45 minutes.

After the break Ukraine manager Oleg Blokhin brought in veteran star Andriy Shevchenko and his club teammate Artem Milevsky in a bid to boost his team's attack.

Ukraine duly levelled in the 56th minute through Gusev who slotted home Andriy Yarmolenko's cross following Sergei Nazarenko's freekick.

Arnautovic put Austria into the lead again in the 62nd minute scoring from Andreas Ivanschitz's pass but Gusev made it 2-2 just three minutes later, firing home from the edge of the box after being played in by Yarmolenko.

King wants to stay at Spurs

AFP, London

Ledley King wants to stay at Tottenham Hotspur even if he can no longer play for them, the veteran defender said Friday.

The 31-year-old, who has endured numerous injury problems, was not on the retained list provided by the club to the Premier League but he has not ruled out signing a new contract.

King, who has been at Spurs since he was a trainee, told the club's official website: "I had a really good start to last season and was pleased to play as many games as I did."

"A knock in training set me back towards the end, but I opted to carry on playing rather than take the time out to have the knee seen to."

"Unfortunately that meant that I didn't play the last few games at the standard I would have liked."