

Drogba fires Ivorians

REUTERS, Cape Town

Didier Drogba was again among the goals as the Ivory Coast led a list of former finalists in a winning start to World Cup qualification but new African champions Zambia lost their opening game on the road to Brazil.

There was also a setback for Morocco, whose coach Eric Gerets' job is now under severe threat after a 1-1 draw away at lowly-ranked Gambia.

Drogba and his Chelsea team mate Salomon Kalou scored for the Ivory Coast as they beat Tanzania 2-0 at home less than a week after changing their coach.

It was the first game for the pair since the Champions League final against Bayern Munich on May 19 and a winning debut for new Ivorian coach Sabir Lamouchi, whose surprise appointment on Monday had been widely criticised.

Algeria, Cameroon, Senegal and Tunisia also triumphed on Saturday as 11 matches were played at the start of the group phase. It followed two matches on Friday and there will be seven more on Sunday.

Both Senegal and Tunisia came from behind to win 3-1 at home in their respective group games.

Senegal overcame Liberia in Dakar while Tunisia beat Equatorial Guinea in Monastir, where a few thousand were allowed to watch the game after months of barring spectators from football in the north African country because of security concerns.

Cameroon, who have been to an African record six World Cups, needed a second half penalty from Eric Choupo Moting in an unconvincing win over the Democratic Republic of Congo in Yaounde.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain forward David Silva (L) celebrates his all-important goal with teammates during an international friendly against China at the Cartuja Stadium in Sevilla on Sunday.

Silva sinks China

Football

AFP, Seville

World and European champions Spain rounded off their preparations for Euro 2012 with a hard-earned 1-0 victory over China here Sunday.

Manchester City striker David Silva grabbed the winning goal with six minutes remaining as a well-organised Chinese side proved difficult to break down.

With several Spanish players looking to press claims for a place in Vicente Del Bosque's side for their Euro 2012 opener against Italy next Sunday, it was Santi Cazorla, Fernando Torres and Silva who most caught the eye.

The visitors, coached by former Spain manager Jose Antonio Camacho, looked more dangerous in the opening exchanges and put up a performance that belied their

FIFA ranking of 66.

Former Celtic player Zheng Zhi caused problems for the Spanish defence on seven minutes when he dispossessed Xabi Alonso in the area and shot wide from a tight angle.

Alvaro Negredo then almost put the hosts ahead after quick thinking from Silva had found him in space, but Zeng Cheng in the Chinese goal did well to block his shot.

Iker Casillas was called into action on a number of occasions in the first period as the Chinese caused Spain a number of problems.

The Chinese captain Zhi, who also played in England for Charlton Athletic, was involved in all his side's good work and was only denied the opening goal by the outstreched leg of Casillas after the Chinese side broke at speed on 28 minutes.

Negredo then shot wide after another Silva pass found him with just the 'keeper to beat but the Chinese comfortably kept Spain's chances down to a minimum in the first-half.

Rosicky resumes training

AFP, Prague

Czech Republic captain Tomas Rosicky resumed full training on Monday after struggling with a calf injury boosting his side as they prepare for Friday's Euro 2012 opener against Russia, Czech media said.

"He's OK now. I think he will play against Russia on Friday," the website of the DNES broadsheet quoted Czech head coach Michal Bilek as saying.

"We could see he's pretty hungry after the break," Bilek added.

The 31-year-old Arsenal midfielder suffered the injury in his last game for the Gunners on May 13.

The injury forced Bilek to replace defender Daniel Pudil with 21-year-old midfielder Vladimir Darida from Czech 2011 champions Viktoria Plzen as a back-up in case Rosicky did not recover in time.

The Czech Republic, in their fifth straight European championships, face Russia on June 8, Greece on June 12 and co-hosts Poland on June 16 in Group A.



PHOTO: AFP

Czech Republic star Tomas Rosicky takes part in the training session in Wroclaw yesterday.

Mexico blank Brazil

AFP, Arlington

Manchester United striker Javier Hernandez and Tottenham Hotspur playmaker Gio Dos Santos scored to give Mexico a 2-0 victory over Brazil in an international football friendly on Sunday.

Dos Santos opened the scoring in the 21st minute and Hernandez converted from the penalty spot in the 32nd minute to give the Mexicans victory before 84,519 spectators at the home stadium of American football's Dallas Cowboys.

Five-time World Cup champions Brazil are testing younger talent ahead of next month's start of the London Olympics while Mexico will begin qualifying matches on Friday for the 2014 World Cup that the Brazilians will host.

Brazil, with playmakers Neymar and Hulk in a starting role, were coming off a 4-1 rout of the United States last Wednesday.

EURO2012 PREVIEW

Expectations are low

AFP, London

For the first time in more than two decades, England will enter a major tournament unencumbered by the weight of expectation when they kick off their European Championship next month.

A shambolic build-up which has seen them sack their captain and part company with the manager who guided them to the finals means England are not looking much further than qualification from Group D.

The success or failure of England's campaign under new manager Roy Hodgson could well hinge on how they fare in their opening game against France in the Ukrainian city of Donetsk on June 11.

If England fail to take something from that demanding opener against Laurent Blanc's rapidly improving side, they will be left with little margin for error against Sweden before a daunting final test against hosts Ukraine.

Hodgson, the Football Association's surprise choice to succeed Fabio Capello following widespread calls for Harry Redknapp to be given the job, is also grappling with the fact that his best player Wayne Rooney will be unavailable for the opening two games of the tournament due to suspension.



Rooney, foolishly sent off for kicking an opponent during England's final qualifier against Montenegro last year, will only be available for the Ukraine game in Donetsk on June 19.

With Darren Bent also struggling to recover from long-term injury, it means Hodgson and England may well start the tournament with an unproven striker leading their front line.

Yet despite the mood of pessimism about England's chances, former manager Graham Taylor believes reduced expectations may work in the country's favour, with Hodgson given a ready-made excuse for failure if the campaign unravels.

"The players and, to a degree, Roy as well, already have a reason if things don't go well," he said. "When you have that, it is surprising how well you do."

"There is very little time for the new manager and players to gel and know how each other work. We all know that."

"But if they don't do very well it won't be their fault. It will be the FA's fault, because the FA get blamed for almost everything."

"How can we expect anything? Look at the group we are in. France in the first game, then Sweden, then one of the co-hosts, Ukraine. That is not an easy group."

Goal-fest in the offing

AFP, Paris



A goal-rich European football season suggests Euro 2012 could be a high-scoring tournament, despite the likely preponderance of apparently conservative single-striker formations.

The 2011-12 campaign was one of the most prolific in the modern history of the European game.

Barcelona and Real Madrid both smashed through the 100-goal barrier in La Liga, the Catalans amassing 114 goals and champions Madrid plundering 121 to obliterate the 107-goal season record set by John Toshack's

Madrid side in 1989-90.

There were freak scorelines in the English Premier League -- notably Manchester United's 8-2 annihilation of Arsenal -- and the goals-per-game ratio climbed in all five of Europe's major leagues except the already high-scoring German Bundesliga.

The continent's leading goalscorers sent records tumbling, and not just Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, who claimed 96 league goals between them.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar was the first player to notch 29 goals in Germany since Karl-Heinz Rummenigge in 1981, while his Dutch team-mate Robin van Persie became only the fourth player to

reach the 30-goal mark in England since 2000.

Despite a steadily diminishing goals-per-game ratio at recent World Cups (from 2.71 in 1994 to 2.27 in South Africa in 2010), the goals do not appear to be drying up in the European Championship.

Both Euro 2004 and Euro 2008 averaged 2.48 goals per game, which was less than the 2.74 goals per game recorded at Euro 2000 but more than the rather disappointing 2.06 witnessed at Euro 1996 in England; the first tournament to feature 16 teams.

Tactically, the 4-2-3-1 formation is likely to dominate as it did at the 2010 World Cup.

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