

Benzema on the double

Football

AFP, Le Mans

France thanked a brace from Real Madrid's Karim Benzema on Monday as they thumped Estonia 4-0 in an impressive Euro 2012 tune-up to give Group D rivals England food for thought.

Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery set the ball rolling in the northern town of Le Mans with the opener on 24 minutes before Benzema made it 2-0 eight minutes before the break as the French found their form.

Benzema added another just two minutes after the restart before Paris Saint Germain forward Jeremy Menez made it four in stoppage time.

On the negative side for Laurent Blanc's men a central defensive partnership of Philippe Mexes of AC Milan and Valencia's Adil Rami had a few nervous moments but that failed to take the gloss off a morale-boosting win and, as a former stopper himself, Blanc should be capable of passing on some tips to his backline.

France have now gone 21 games unbeaten and the memories of a disastrous 2010 World Cup are finally beginning to fade away.



French striker Karim Benzema (R) celebrates one of his two goals against Estonia during their international friendly at the Le Mans Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy draft in Astori

AFP, Krakow

Davide Astori is to join up with the Italy Euro 2012 squad as cover for injured veteran centreback Andrea Barzagli it was reported by ANSA on Wednesday.

Astori, 25 and who plays for Serie A side Cagliari, will arrive later on Wednesday but coach Cesare Prandelli will not make a final decision until Friday as he regards Juventus star Barzagli integral to the team's chances of doing well.

Prandelli's preferred choice for Barzagli was Inter Milan's Andrea Ranocchia, but the too is injured.

Cash bonus for Ukraine

AFP, Kiev

Ukrainian football's chief Grigory Surkis said on Wednesday the Ukrainian players would be well-rewarded for succeeding at Euro 2012 which they are co-hosting with Poland, local media reported Wednesday.

"The team will receive 500,000 euro for every win at the group stage, while a draw will bring the squad 250,000 euro."

Surkis added that the team will get a two million euro bonus for making the knockout stages and the same amount for reaching the semifinals.

If Ukraine's team make it to the final they will earn three million euros and 4.5 million euros for winning the title.

EURO2012 PREVIEW Ukraine's big dream

AFP, Kiev

Euro 2012 co-hosts Ukraine are dreaming of an historic success for a young nation two decades after independence but their hopes are blighted by a tough group and a litany of injury troubles.

The co-hosting of the championships with Poland is the biggest event Ukraine has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the team wants to inspire a nation that is still mired in poverty and deeply divided.

However, their mission may remain impossible after being drawn in a tough Group D with England, Euro 2000 winners France and traditionally uncompromising fighters Sweden.

Ukraine manager Oleg Blokhin, a legendary striker in Soviet football, nevertheless said he believed his players are capable of clinching a knockout stage place by upsetting the odds.

"England and France can consider themselves the group's favourites, it's their right," said Blokhin, 59. "But we and, I believe, Sweden have our own view of things."

"We have experience of playing well against France and England. And we will do our best to play with dignity in front of our fans. And I believe their support will give us extra strength."

Over half a decade after the Orange Revolution inspired hopes of a new beginning for Ukraine, the country is still battling economic crisis and stark divisions between its Russian-speaking east and Ukrainian-speaking west.

Ukraine now has a unique chance to showcase the nation of over 45 million to the world and create a sense of national unity, despite a furor over the jailing of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko that has led to threats of an EU boycott.

Ukraine's team remains an unknown quantity as the host country did not need to play in the qualifying tournament and only played friendly matches ahead of the event.

But a 3-3 home draw with three-time World Cup winners Germany, a 2-1 win over Austria and the recent 3-2 victory over Israel gave Ukraine's fans optimism.

Blokhin has brought some fresh blood into his squad while keeping the experienced veterans who formed the Ukrainian team's backbone for years.

Veteran star striker Andriy Shevchenko, forward Andriy Voronin, who was named player of the year in the former Soviet Union region this year, Bayern Munich midfielder Anatoliy Tymoshchuk and goalkeepers Olexander Shovkovskiy and Andriy Pyatov will all be likely included into Blokhin's squad.

Meanwhile, Blokhin can also turn to young stars like Denys Garmash, Andriy Yarmolenko and Maxym Koval from Dynamo Kiev, Yevgen Konoplyanka of Dnepropetrovsk and Yaroslav Rakitskiy of Shakhtar Donetsk.

Ukraine made their first and last appearance in a major finals at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, where they reached the quarterfinals, losing to eventual winners Italy.

But injury worries are already casting a shadow over Blokhin's ambitions: Ukraine's first-choice keeper Andriy Dykan looks likely to be ruled out after sustaining facial injuries in a Russian league match.

Shakhtar Donetsk keeper Olexander Rybka was handed a two-year ban for failing a dope test.

Shakhtar defender Dmytro Chygrynskiy remains uncertain because of an injury, while Shevchenko is battling back to full fitness after a serious back injury.



Euro jerseys toxic!

AFP, Brussels



Official jerseys for the upcoming Euro 2012 have been handed a red card by a consumer group even before the tournament kicks off for being tainted with lead, nickel and other toxic substances.

The European Consumer Organisation, BEUC, called a "chemical foul play" this week after testing nine official tournament shirts.

"All were found to have worrying levels of chemical content," it said in a statement.

One of its members played down the warning, however. A spokesman for Belgian consumer group Test Achat, Jean-Philippe Ducart said "there's no need to dramatise."

Referring to the quantities found, he told AFP that "there's nothing illegal, even though special attention is needed for vulnerable groups such as children."

BEUC said lead, a heavy metal, was found

in six of nine tested shirts -- those of Spain, Germany, Ukraine, Russia, France and Italy.

Players from Portugal and the Netherlands will play in shirts containing nickel, it said.

Jerseys from host nation Poland "should be banned outright from shops" for containing a compound to prevent the smell of sweat -- organotin -- that can be toxic to the nervous system.

Nonylphenol, which can be bad for the endocrine system and is banned from wastewater because it can harm the environment, was found in shirts from Spain and Italy.

With fans paying up to 90 euros for some jerseys "the least they should expect is to have a quality and safe product," said BEUC director Monique Goyens.

"It is inexplicable that heavy metals are used in mass consumer products," she said.

Tests were conducted by BEUC members in Italy, Portugal and Spain on jerseys from Poland, Spain, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Italy, France, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Sweden warm up well

Football

AFP, Stockholm

Sweden beat Serbia 2-1 in their final pre-Euro friendly on Wednesday, securing an encouraging victory which nonetheless raised questions about whether the team's defence is up to scratch ahead of Euro 2012.

Sweden started off the scoring in the 23rd minute after Serbia's keeper Branimir Aleksic fumbled the ball on a Swedish corner and Ola Toivonen tapped it through the posts with his heel.

But Serbia equalised just four minutes later, after a tackle by midfielder Anders Svensson gave Serbia a free kick that led to a corner which Neven Subotic headed in

between two Swedish defenders.

Serbian keeper Damir Kahrman, who replaced Aleksic at the start of the second half, pulled down Toivonen and earned Sweden a penalty kick in the 52nd minute, which Zlatan Ibrahimovic blasted into the far-left corner to produce Sweden's winning goal.

Sweden's attackers picked up the tempo in the second-half.

But despite the win, the hosts looked shaky and uncertain, nowhere near the smooth-playing and united team seen during training camp, raising as to whether coach Erik Hamren would be able to iron out the wrinkles before the Euros start.

Also of concern was Sweden's starting goalkeeper Andreas Isaksson, who left the pitch in the 71st minute with a slight groin injury.

Spain go through their paces

AFP, Warsaw



Spain on Wednesday began fine-tuning their bid to retain the European title they won four years ago, as the last teams for Euro 2012 were expected to arrive in Poland and Ukraine.

Vicente Del Bosque's side were put through their paces at their secluded training camp in Gniewino, near the Baltic port city of Gdansk in northern Poland, cheered on by some 300 Polish fans and about 40 travelling Spanish supporters.

The outfield players -- who included their two minor injury worries fullback Alvaro Arbeloa and striker Jesus Navas -- trained to a rousing chorus of "Guantanamera" from the stands.

Among the spectators was student Gonzalo Panadero, who had travelled the 70 kilometres (44 miles) from Gdansk where he is studying psychology on a one-year exchange programme.

"Defending the title will be difficult. But we will go far," he said confidently.

Spain have been drawn in Group C with Croatia, the Republic of Ireland and Italy and take on the Azzurri in Gdansk on Sunday.

Italy, who are based in the southern Polish city of Krakow, on Wednesday visited the former Nazi German death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 1.3 million people, most of them Jews, perished in World War II.

Dressed in blue and white team track-suits, they visited the barracks, the wall

where prisoners were shot, before going to the gas chambers in nearby Birkenau three kilometres away and the largely destroyed crematorium where victims' bodies were burned.

They then placed a commemorative wreath inscribed with the words "Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio" -- Italian football federation -- at the memorial.

"Such an atrocity should never happen again. What happened here doesn't just concern one people. It concerns all of humanity. Their pain is our pain," the Italians wrote in the visitors' book.

They were later followed by players from the Netherlands, who made the same tour.

A delegation from the German football federation, including coach Joachim Loew, team manager Oliver Bierhoff, captain Philipp Lahm and Polish-born players Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski, visited the Auschwitz museum last Friday.

England, who are also setting up their base in Krakow, are also expected to visit after they arrive on Wednesday.

Roy Hodgson's first Group D opponents France were due to arrive at their impressive base near Donetsk, Ukraine later on Wednesday. Sweden, 2-1 winners over Serbia in a friendly on Tuesday, were expected in Kiev about the same time.

Laurent Blanc's France fly to Ukraine on a high after a 4-0 friendly win over Estonia on Tuesday and are hoping to erase memories of a 2010 World Cup, which saw a player mutiny against coach Raymond Domenech and a humiliating first-round exit.



Spain's Fernando Torres (L) is challenged by midfielder Cesc Fabregas during a training session in Gniewino yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Could the Tigers have played other formats before World T20s?

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What to WATCH

TEN Cricket

Sri Lanka v Pakistan

First ODI

Live from 3:00pm

STAR Cricket

England v West Indies

Third Test, Day 1

Live from 4:00pm

NEO Sports

French Open

Women's Singles Semifinals and Mixed Doubles Final

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Premier League

Sk Russel v Muktijoddha

Time: 5:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National