

Sweden ride on Elmander

AFP, Stockholm

Sweden beat China 1-0 on Thursday in a lacklustre warm-up match that saw Zlatan Ibrahimovic sit out the second half ahead of the hosts' World Cup qualifier against Kazakhstan next week.

The game's only goal came right at the start of the second half, when Sweden's Ola Toivonen set up Johan Elmander who easily slipped the ball past China's keeper Dalei Wang.

Playing in a near-empty Olympia Stadium in Helsingborg in southern Sweden, both teams appeared to lack energy and motivation in the first half.

Sweden in particular failed to take advantage of a few good chances and Paris Saint Germain striker Ibrahimovic hit the post. But the Swedish captain took no chances with his bruised right foot and sat out the second half with an ice pack.

He suffered a bruise in mid-August when he was kicked during the French Ligue 1 opener against Lorient and has been bothered by it since.

Ibrahimovic, 31, has scored 33 goals in 81 matches for Sweden and sat out a friendly against Brazil last month because of his foot woes.

Prior to Thursday's match against China, Swedish coach Erik Hamren had made it clear that his priority was to have Ibrahimovic game-ready for Sweden's all-important qualifier against Kazakhstan on September 11.

The Scandinavian country faces off in Group C against Germany, Ireland, Austria, Kazakhstan and the Faroe Islands.

German stars visit Enke's grave

AFP, Berlin

Members of the Germany squad on Thursday visited the grave of former national goalkeeper Robert Enke, nearly three years after his suicide, ahead of their World Cup qualifier against the Faroe Islands.

Senior players Miroslav Klose, Lukas Podolski and Per Mertesacker visited Enke's grave in Empelde, near Hanover, after the Germany goalkeeper committed suicide on November 10, 2009, having suffered from depression.

There were no members of the media at the visit: "It was important for the players to visit the grave in silence," explained team spokesman Jens Grittner.

Germany host Faroe Islands in Hanover on Friday in their opening qualifier for Brazil 2014.

"The Memory of Robert is very present on these days in Hanover," added team manager Oliver Bierhoff as Enke was Hanover's captain in 2009 and his funeral service was held at the club's AWD Arena, where the qualifier will take place.

Along with Bierhoff, the German players also visited the Robert Enke Foundation, which educates the public about childhood disease and depression.



What to Watch

TEN Sports

US Open

Men's Singles Semifinals

Live from 9:30pm

Women's Singles Final

Live from 6:00am (Sunday)

ESPN

England v South Africa

First T20I

Live from 7:30pm

STAR Cricket

India v New Zealand

First T20I

China midfielder Hanchao Yu (L) evades a sliding-tackle from Sweden counterpart Pontus Wernbloom during their international friendly at the Olympia Stadium in Helsingborg on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Kaka past his prime'

Football

SOCCERNET

Real Madrid boss Jose Mourinho has suggested Kaka is unlikely to ever regain the form he showed at AC Milan.

Kaka, 30, was named the FIFA World Player of the Year in 2007 after helping Milan to glory in the Champions League, and Madrid broke the world transfer record when taking him to the Bernabeu in June 2009.

However, he has struggled to live up to expectations in Spain, with a series of injuries hampering his chances.

"What has happened to Kaka has happened before to many great players - stars who, for one reason or another, were not able to maintain the same level at new clubs," he told AS. "Obviously football is not mathematics and players are not robots. Kaka arrived with physical issues and did not play regularly in his first two seasons. Last year he had very, very good periods and did good things for us."

The Brazilian would have limited chances to feature this season, Mourinho said.

"His situation is not easy as we have other options, but he has accepted the challenge," he said. "He is training well. When we need to use him we will use him and try to get the best out of him. When that moment comes, Kaka will respond and help Madrid." In contrast, Luka Modric, this summer's 37 million euros signing from Tottenham, is set to be a key player for Madrid this season.

"He was the only signing we thought about, and we did it because I like him as a player," Mourinho said. "I was sure he will fit in well in the dressing room and because Madrid's supporters would like him."

"He has talent and tactical discipline in equal amounts. He is a team player who looks for and makes himself available for team-mates. He also has a touch of class, or magic, that the Bernabeu likes. We have signed Modric as he will make us enjoy ourselves and help us to win."

Rooney regrets transfer request

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney has admitted that handing in his transfer request two years ago was the biggest mistake of his career.

Rooney is currently promoting his latest autobiography, My Decade in the Premier League, which is also being serialised by the Daily Mirror. In the latest extract, Rooney admits he regretted asking for a transfer.

Rooney issued a statement in September 2010 in which he questioned United's ability to attract top players and indicated he wanted to leave.

Two days later, though, he performed a dramatic U-turn and signed a new five-year contract.

He wrote: "In September 2010 my ankle puts me on the sidelines.

"I get frustrated with myself, my game, my injury, and everything around me.

"I'm stuck in a cycle of bad form but I can't get out of it.

"And that's when I make the biggest mistake of my football career.

"In October, I release a statement which publicly questions my happiness at Old Trafford. Am I better off elsewhere?

"Everyone makes a fuss. There are discussions inside United to sort out the issue, people outside United chuck their opinions around, but the thing is, nobody really knows what's going on in my life.

"None of them understand where I am in my career. They don't know where my head's at.

"The only person who really knows what's going on in there is me, but even I'm not sure what I want."

He continued: "Then the manager has his say. 'Sometimes you look in a field and you see a cow and you think it's a better cow than the one you have in your own field. And it never really works that way'.

"He's saying the grass isn't always greener, and he's right.

"I like what's in my field. I'm wrong. United want the same as me: trophies, success, to be the best."

Meanwhile Rooney told the Manchester Evening News that his recovery is on track after suffering a gash to his leg in a tackle against Fulham a fortnight ago.

"The injury is going well. It could have been a lot worse than what it was. It is up to the doctor. When he declares me fit I will be ready.

"What I don't want to happen is to come back too early when it is not quite healed and it opens up again first game. That would just set me back again another four weeks."

"Overall, I think at the most I will miss four games."

He added that he was keen to get back onto the pitch to start building a partnership with summer signing Robin van Persie.

"I am looking forward to getting back into the team and trying to forge an understanding with him (Van Persie)," Rooney added.

'Old guys still the best'

AFP, Bangkok

Former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson Friday backed current boss Roy Hodgson's decision to stick with the country's "old guys" -- saying he had no one better to replace them.

Eriksson, speaking to AFP after taking up a new post in Thailand, said 30-something stalwarts John Terry, Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard remained the best choice as England embark on 2014 World Cup qualifying.

"That means he hasn't found anyone better... so he has decided to stick with the old guys," Eriksson said of the trio, who were all members of his 2006 World Cup squad.

"They are still playing regularly for their clubs, why shouldn't they be in the national team?"

This week, Hodgson made a robust defence of his old stagers as England prepare to open their qualifying campaign in Moldova, followed by a home game against Ukraine next week.

"Because I think they are good enough, that's why," Hodgson shot back, when asked why he had picked the three.

"I want to win football matches and I won't be prepared to throw players of Terry, Lampard and Gerrard's quality away from the national team until I am sure there are much better players who can take their place and help us win games," he added.

Eriksson will watch England's progress from Bangkok, where he is advising Thai Premier League side BEC Tero Sasana "until the end of the season", which finishes next month.

Considered one of the game's best managers when he took the England job in 2001, he has since endured unsuccessful spells at English clubs Manchester City, Notts County and Leicester City, and national sides Mexico and Ivory Coast.

Barton to serve ban in France

REUTERS, Paris

Olympique Marseille midfielder Joey Barton will serve the remaining nine games of his 12-match ban in France after joining the club on a one-year loan from Queens Park Rangers, the French league (LFP) said on Thursday.

The 30-year-old was suspended for 12 games by the English FA after being sent off for violent conduct in QPR's final Premier League match of last season against Manchester City.

He was dismissed for elbowing Carlos Tevez and then kicked Sergio Aguero. He also appeared to try and headbutt City captain Vincent Kompany.

"When Joey Barton was transferred from Queens Park Rangers to Olympique Marseille, the FA relayed the sanction taken against him to the French soccer federation," the LFP said on its website.

"According to FIFA rules... the player, who has already served three games, has been suspended for the next nine matches in the French competitions."

Shinji fails to shine

Football

REUTERS, Niigata

Manchester United's Shinji Kagawa cut a forlorn figure after being substituted at halftime during Japan's 1-0 friendly victory over the United Arab Emirates, having made little impact on the game.

After enjoying an impressive start to his United career, triggering 'Kagawa-mania' across Japan, the forward failed to mask his disappointment after Thursday's match.

"Of course I wanted to play more minutes," the 23-year-old told reporters after Japan struggled in their final warm-up for a home World Cup qualifier against Iraq on Tuesday.

"I always want to score but the coach makes the decisions. I'll have to look at my performance today," added Kagawa, who sat at the end of the bench in the second half, barely talking.

"My body felt a little heavier than I expected, probably from the flight."

Kagawa has been an instant hit at Old Trafford, earning praise from United manager Alex Ferguson, who paid 17 million euros (\$21.4 million) for the former Borussia Dortmund playmaker in June.

His transfer to one of the world's top clubs elevated him to celebrity status, leading to him being mobbed by fans at Sapporo airport before a friendly last month.

However, Kagawa was ineffective on Thursday, striker Mike Havenaar sparing

Japan's blushes with a 69th-minute winner to give the Asian champions an unconvincing win.

Midfielder Keisuke Honda had blazed over with barely a minute on the clock following a clever back-heel from Kagawa but that early promise was the United signing's best moment in a tired-looking display.

Kagawa often found himself taking the ball into blind alleys and was hauled off after frustrating coach Alberto Zaccheroni by attempting a few too many stepovers which led to no end product.

"Fatigue is not an excuse," Kagawa said. "I wasn't able to run as much as I thought I would. I gradually want to focus my sights on the Iraq game. The next game will be a completely different atmosphere."

Captain Makoto Hasegawa and Honda were also substituted early on Thursday ahead of the clash with Iraq, currently under the stewardship of former Japan coach Zico.

Japan overpowered Oman 3-0 and Jordan 6-0 at home before being held 1-1 in Australia in June in their first three games in the final round of Asian 2014 World Cup qualifiers.

"The next game is the most important. It will be a lot tougher - it's why I'm here," Kagawa added. "Hopefully I can make a real difference and we can take our chances."

The Blue Samurai lead World Cup qualifying Group B by five points from Iraq, Australia and Jordan.

PHOTO: AFP

Japan star Shinji Kagawa (R) tries to beat United Arab Emirates forward Ahmed Khalil during their international friendly soccer in Niigata on Thursday.

Spurs loan Bentley to Rostov

AFP, London

Tottenham midfielder David Bentley made a surprise loan move to Russian club FC Rostov on Thursday.

Bentley has been out of favour at White Hart Lane for much of the last two years and the former England international has been loaned to Rostov until January after the Premier League club were unable to sell him during the transfer window.

The 28-year-old joined Spurs from Blackburn in 2008 for a then club record fee of £15 million having started his professional career at Arsenal, where he briefly earned comparisons with Dutch legend Dennis Bergkamp.

But Bentley, who has made only 42 league appearances for Spurs, never fulfilled his potential at White Hart Lane and was loaned out to Birmingham and West Ham in 2011.

Bentley, who has won seven caps for England, also underwent surgery after suffering a serious knee injury while at West Ham last October.