

Germany chase hat-trick

REUTERS, Berlin



Germany go in search of a third straight victory at the start of their World Cup qualifying campaign when they take on Group C rivals Ireland in the unique atmosphere that is always generated in Dublin.

The triple world champions last visited Dublin for a European Championship qualifier in 2007 and midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger still has fond memories of the occasion.

"It is a special feeling playing there," said Schweinsteiger who is back in the squad for the first time since their Euro 2012 semi-final defeat by Italy. "The atmosphere is different, it has this special something."

"We had the joy of playing there five years ago and it is difficult to win there. It would be a huge advantage to get the three points but they are a tough team with a clever fox of a coach (Giovanni Trapattoni)," he told reporters on Tuesday.

Germany, who have won only one of their last five encounters with Ireland, are without injured central defender Mats Hummels, midfielders Lars Bender and Ilkay Guendogan while captain Philipp

Lahm is suspended.

The visitors, who had a 100 per cent record in Euro 2012 qualifying with 10 victories in 10 games, want to maintain their fine run ahead of next Tuesday's clash with Sweden.

"The target is qualification and we have a lot of work to do in these two games," said team manager Oliver Bierhoff.

"These are the two toughest opponents in the group. After the last campaign when we won all 10 games, expectations are high."

Coach Joachim Loew has had to soak up some criticism for the Euro 2012 semifinal exit and for the team being below their best in their opening two World Cup fixtures.

"We need to improve, we need to play better both when we have possession and when we do not have the ball," said Schweinsteiger.

Ireland were extraordinarily lucky to escape from Kazakhstan with a victory in their first qualifier last month, scoring twice in the final two minutes to record a 2-1 victory that did little to ease the pressure on Trapattoni following a disappointing Euro 2012.

The Italian's chances of matching the draw Ireland managed against Germany the last time the sides met in Dublin almost five years to the day have been hit by a string of injuries.



Germany forward Thomas Mueller (L) and defender Heiko Westermann practise headers during a training session in Frankfurt yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Japan plot killing giants

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's coach Alberto Zaccheroni and playmaker Keisuke Honda have vowed to come out fighting against former world champions France and Brazil, despite their underdog status.

"I don't feel we are going up against teams that are a class above us," CSKA Moscow's Honda said as he landed in Paris after scoring a goal and setting up another in Sunday's 2-0 win over Spartak Moscow.

The Blue Samurai, who reached the last 16 at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, will play Les Bleus at the Stade de France in Paris on October 12 and Brazil in another friendly in Wroclaw, Poland, four days later.

"I don't want to see Japan hold back and defend. We will fight with courage," Zaccheroni said at the start of a training camp in the suburbs of Paris on Monday, according to Japanese media.

Japan, who won a record fourth Asian Cup last year under Zaccheroni, are currently ranked 23rd in the world. France, who won the World Cup at

home in 1998, are 13th and five-time holders Brazil 14th.

Asked by reporters if he felt France and Brazil were of a different class, Honda, nursing a bruised right calf, shot back: "I see it the other way around. I don't see it like others do."

The 26-year-old World Cup hero, who has been assigned by Zaccheroni to the "hole" behind a single striker, a position preferred by teammate and Manchester United newcomer Shinji Kagawa, refused to say how he would fell the giants.

"I have mentally mapped out the straightforward way I will play against them, but I'd better not say it," he said. "I want to wait until after the games to ask how everyone felt about our performance."

Zaccheroni, who took over Japan after South Africa 2010, reaffirmed his goal of turning the Blue Samurai into serious contenders at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

"Japan have exceeded Brazil and France in the rate of growth in recent years," said the 59-year-old, who coached AC Milan and other Serie-A sides before coming to Japan.

"We still have about two years to go before the World Cup and I want to bring us up to stand level (with France and Brazil)," he said.

Zaccheroni has called up 13 Europe-based players for his 23-strong touring squad, also including Inter Milan defender Yuto Nagatomo and Southampton defender Maya Yoshida alongside several German-based players.

In World Cup qualifying, Japan are leading Asian Group B with 10 points from three wins and one draw as they bid for a fifth straight World Cup finals. They will play their next qualifier away to Oman on November 14.

"In Asian games, our opponents mostly hold back and defend," the coach said, adding that France and Brazil might think Japan would do the same against them.

"We won't know where we stand in the world now if we don't fight with courage. I want to see French and Brazilian players have a hard time and be on the defensive."

Japan have never won in their past five matches against France and eight against Brazil. They drew with France once and with Brazil twice.

Ashley says sorry

AFP, London



Chelsea defender Ashley Cole has made a personal apology to Football Association chairman David Bernstein on Tuesday after a foul-mouthed outburst against the English game's governing body.

Cole was charged with misconduct by the FA on Monday after the England star's outburst on Twitter last week in response to the organisation's criticism of his evidence in the John Terry racial abuse hearing.

The 31-year-old was quick to delete the tweet - in which he branded the FA "a bunch of twats" - and also issued a statement apologising for his rant, but Bernstein revealed that Cole had also said sorry to him in person on Monday.

"He apologised immediately on Friday and he came to see me last night and apologised to me personally," Bernstein told BBC Radio Five Live.

"He showed real contrition. He said he was really sorry."

"It was a serious apology. He expressed a degree of remorse for what he had done, wished it hadn't happened."

"I looked him in the eye and really felt that he meant it."

Bernstein also stressed that England manager Roy Hodgson will decide whether Cole plays against San Marino in Friday's World Cup qualifier at Wembley after some pundits called for him to be dropped as punishment for the Twitter controversy.

"He is free to play for England over the coming matches. It is up to the manager to decide whether he plays or not," Bernstein added.

With Hodgson left to decide whether or not to play Cole, the only threat to his chances of winning a 99th cap would appear to be if the England manager opts to rest him ahead of the crucial trip to Poland next week. However, Bernstein did admit that Cole's actions meant he was unlikely to captain England for what could be his landmark 100th cap against Poland next Tuesday.

Asked about the possibility of Cole being given the armband to mark the occasion, Bernstein, who played a key role in Terry being stripped of the captaincy over the Anton Ferdinand race row, said: "To be absolutely honest I doubt it. We've expressed a view on what we need with regard to a captain and I doubt it, but we'll see."

"We've had issues and we've stated publicly many times that we have a very high level of behaviour and so on and so forth required from an English captain."

Casillas not worried yet

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas played down Tuesday the eight-point gap separating the defending champions from league leaders Barcelona, saying the disparity in the standings won't become important until December.

Casillas said he was satisfied with his side's 2-2 draw against their arch-rivals Barca on Sunday, telling Cope radio it was far too early to be overly concerned about Real's position in the table.

"If we are still eight points behind in the month of December, I would be more pessimistic regarding La Liga (...). But now, there are still numerous matches to play. A 2-2 at Camp Nou is a good result, even from the point of view of goal average," explained Casillas.

After Sunday's draw in Catalonia, Madrid stand fifth in the table but Casillas was quick to highlight that Tito Vilanova's Barca are not their only challengers for the title.

The Spain shot-stopper refused to discount Real's city rivals Atletico, who are joint top with Barca on 19 points after seven matches.

"One can't exclude Atletico Madrid, authors of a superb run after seven matches. This good start does not surprise me. (Coach Diego) Simeone, since his arrival, has formed a very compact team in all areas. It's a team that could fight up until the end for the title," said Casillas.

The veteran goalkeeper also voiced his support for teammate Cristiano Ronaldo, who matched Lionel Messi with two goals in Sunday's Clasico, in the race with the Argentine superstar for this year's Ballon d'Or award.



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GP Federation Cup
Sk Russel v Rampur Boys Club
Time: 3:30pm
Team BJMC v Soccer Club, Feni
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Arambagh v Khulna Abahani
Time: 3:30pm

Ronaldo set to play

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal's star striker Cristiano Ronaldo is set to shrug off a weekend shoulder injury sustained playing for Real Madrid in time for Friday's World Cup qualifier with Russia, the Portuguese team doctor said Monday.

"We think we can get him fit in time for the Russia match," said Dr Henrique Jones.

Ronaldo suffered a sprain during Real's 2-2 draw with Barcelona but still joined up with the national squad.

The striker, who scored both of his club's goals at Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium on Sunday, landed badly on his shoulder after trying to score with an overhead kick in the 64th minute.

Paulo Bento's squad met up Monday in the central city of Obidos, ahead of their trip to Moscow before they face Northern Ireland on October 16 in Porto.

Real Madrid Pepe defender and Valencia fullback Joao Pereira are also looking to shrug off knocks ahead of the Russia game - a crucial showdown with both countries having won their opening two qualifiers.



Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo arrives at Praia Del Rey on Monday to attend a training camp in preparation for the upcoming 2014 World Cup qualifier against Russia.

PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal won't break bank for Walcott

AFP, London

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood has warned Theo Walcott that his club have no intention of smashing their wage structure to keep him at the Emirates Stadium.

Walcott is out of contract at the end of the season and the England winger has reportedly rejected Arsenal's latest offer of £75,000-a-week wages as he looks for a better deal.

Talks are ongoing but as yet no new deal has been agreed, with Liverpool and Chelsea said to be interested in signing Walcott if he can't reach a compromise with the Gunners.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger remains confident Walcott will stay, but Hill-Wood insists they will not break the bank to please the former Southampton player.

"We have got our general overall wage structure and we are not prepared to break it for anybody," Hill-Wood told the Daily Star.

"We have made an offer which he didn't think was acceptable and that is the end of it. We think it is a very reasonable offer."

"For the moment his people are still talking to us and we hope it will be resolved. But don't ask me when, because I haven't a clue."

"I hope that he will eventually come round and sign. It will be a pity if he does not, but the whole issue of pay for footballers has got totally out of hand and they don't get terribly well advised a lot of the time."

Asian Cup draw held

Football

AFP, Sydney

Three-time champions Saudi Arabia were placed in the same group as 2007 winners Iraq and China in the preliminary draw for the 2015 Asian Cup made in Melbourne on Tuesday.

Iraq, which beat the Saudis in the Jakarta final five years ago, headline Group C along with 2004 runners-up China and 2007 co-hosts Indonesia.

Triple champions Iran will face 1980 winners Kuwait, Thailand and Lebanon in Group B, while Uzbekistan will meet Hong Kong, 2007 quarter-finalists Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates in Group E.

Syria were drawn with Jordan in Group A along with Oman and Singapore, while 2011 hosts and quarter-finalists Qatar make up Group D with Bahrain, Yemen and Malaysia.

The top two teams from each group and the best third-placed team among all the groups will qualify for the tournament proper to be held in Australia in 2015. The qualifiers begin in February.

Reigning Asian Cup champions Japan, hosts and runners-up Australia, third-placed South Korea, AFC Challenge Cup 2012 winners North Korea and the champions of the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup gain direct berths in the final competition in Australia.

"The preliminary draw has thrown up some great contests and we are sure to see some exciting matches over the next 18 months," said Asian Football Confederation (AFC) acting president Zhang Jilong.

Frank Lowy, chairman of Football Federation Australia, said Australia was determined to deliver the best Asian Cup yet.

"It will be a feast of international football, and we're confident that Australians will get behind all the 16 teams, as we have shown for other major events."

Sydney will host the final, expected to be played on January 31, and also the two semifinals.

Melbourne will host the Asian Cup's opening match, on the weekend of January 8. It has missed out on the games at the business end of the tournament, partly to avoid clashing with the Australian Open tennis grand slam event.

Matches will also be played in Canberra, Brisbane and possibly the Gold Coast.

PRELIMINARY DRAW

Group A - Jordan, Syria, Oman, Singapore
Group B - Iran, Kuwait, Thailand, Lebanon
Group C - Iraq, China, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia
Group D - Qatar, Bahrain, Yemen, Malaysia
Group E - Uzbekistan, UAE, Vietnam, Hong Kong.