

Abidal back in training

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona defender Eric Abidal is in fitness training in a mountain camp and practising football for the first time since his April liver transplant, the club has revealed.

Abidal, who underwent the operation on April 10 just over a year after having a tumour removed from his liver in March 2011, is reportedly aiming to rejoin the team in December.

"I have been thinking about kicking the ball again for a long time. Today is the first day. I am tired but happy," the 33-year-old French international told BarcaTV.

Abidal is in training this week at Val d'Aran in the Catalan Pyrenees where Barcelona has planned a week of training for him, the club said in a statement posted online late Tuesday.

"During the week Abidal is doing the player is expected to combine aerobics, some mountain treks and some work on the pitch where he will restart some football training," the club said.

"I am going little by little, adjusting my technique a bit, even if I did not have much before," Abidal joked.

Barcelona-based daily Sport said the French left-back planned to rejoin the rest of the team in training in November and hoped to return to competition in December.

"I want to rejoin the group soon but without rushing things," he was quoted as saying in Wednesday's edition of Sport.

Abidal last played in France's 2-1 victory over Germany on February 29 this year.

C'Ron in line for return

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal defender Pepe says his team-mate Cristiano Ronaldo is the likeliest of the two to overcome injury in time for their crunch World Cup qualifier in Russia on Friday.

Ronaldo has a shoulder injury and Pepe a thigh strain.

On Wednesday, the pair both took part in their first training sessions since picking up the injuries while helping Real Madrid earn a 2-2 draw with Barcelona at the weekend. Both of them trained alone, however.

"I think Ronaldo has a better chance of playing in the match on Friday than I do, but we both want to be there to help Portugal," said Pepe after his work-out.

The match is a table-topper for European zone Group F, as both Portugal and Russia have two wins from their opening two games.

"It's a big match for us, but not a crucial one. It's always good to beat your main rivals, but avoiding defeat would also be a positive result for us," said Pepe.

Valencia right-back Joao Pereira also reported for international duty nursing a light injury, but was back in full training on Wednesday.

What to WATCH

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Live at 8:30pm

DAY'S EVENT

GP Federation Cup
Abahani v Rahmatganj
Time: 3:30pm
Sk Jamal v Noakhali Football Academy
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi rests on the ground as teammate Gonzalo Higuain walks by during a training session in Buenos Aires on Tuesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Messi headache for rivals

REUTERS, Buenos Aires



Stopping Lionel Messi is the primary concern of South American teams facing Argentina in the World Cup qualifiers. This week it is Uruguay's turn.

Argentina defend their lead in the South American group at home to Uruguay in Mendoza on Friday (0100 GMT Saturday). After seven matches they have 14 points, one more than Colombia and Ecuador and two ahead of Uruguay and Chile.

They will be looking to make amends for a poor performance in their last match, a 1-1 draw with Peru in Lima where Messi, who had scored 10 goals in his previous six internationals, had one of his quietest games for his country.

South American champions Uruguay want a second successive upset over their neighbours after their Copa America quarterfinal victory on penalties last year.

Uruguay's coach Oscar Washington Tabarez does not believe in man-marking Messi, but rather in preventing Argentina from functioning in support of the Barcelona ace.

"Messi is a great player, among the best seen in the history of football...so I'm not going to say too much about

that because it would be redundant," Tabarez told reporters in Montevideo on Tuesday.

"But Messi has a team around him trying to ensure he shows all his potential.

"So we have to work on and counter everything Argentina does for the ball to get to Messi and after Messi takes it try to mark him."

The Uruguayans, World Cup semi-finalists in 2010, need to recover from a poor September when they lost 4-0 away to Colombia and only managed a 1-1 draw at home to Ecuador.

Captain Diego Lugano believes this double away fixture will be the hardest trip for Uruguay, who play Bolivia at high altitude in La Paz next week, in the 16-match qualifying series.

"These are key (qualifying) points, much more so after the last double-header when we didn't do well," Lugano said.

"We're facing two matches that are surely the most difficult of the qualifying series. An Argentina-Bolivia sequence (away) is very hard and we're practically obliged to bring back some points," the central defender said.

Uruguay have to manage without left wing back Alvaro Pereyra, who is suspended, and injured midfielders Diego Perez and Gaston Ramirez.

Argentina, who beat Paraguay 3-1 at home then drew 1-1 away to Peru

last month, welcome back Sergio Agüero but have lost fellow striker Ezequiel Lavezzi to injury.

Midfielder Javier Mascherano said good results against Uruguay and then Chile away in Santiago four days later would put Argentina well on course for a berth in the 2014 finals in Brazil.

"If we can get six out of six points it would be ideal and we would be well on track to qualifying, not certain but on the right track," Mascherano said at Argentina's training base outside Buenos Aires.

"For us, the match against Uruguay is a classic. The last ones we have played against them were very tight (and) if we win we'd go with more confidence to Chile."

The Chileans, whose coach Claudio Borghi is serving a four-match suspension for dissent, first travel to play Ecuador in the rarefied air of Quito nearly 3,000 metres above sea level on Friday (2100 GMT).

Colombia, with striker Falcao in red-hot scoring form, are at home to bottom team Paraguay in their favourite Caribbean cauldron in Barranquilla (2030 GMT) and Bolivia, at home in both fixtures, host Peru in La Paz (2000 GMT).

Venezuela, in sixth place with 11 points having already played eight matches, have a bye at the halfway stage in the competition.

Thorpe inspires Rooney

AFP, Burton Upon Trent



Wayne Rooney hopes he is ready to finally perform at his best for England after being inspired by the words of Olympic swimming legend Ian Thorpe.

The Manchester United forward is back in the England squad for Friday's World Cup qualifier against San Marino after recovering from a gashed thigh he suffered playing for his club in August.

The Wembley match also marks his first international since an uninspiring Euro 2012, for which he was initially suspended.

A widely-reported pre-tournament holiday Las Vegas, while he was injured, did not go down well either.

He was later accused by former England manager Fabio Capello of only playing his best football for United, but while accepting the nature of the criticism he has received for his international displays, Rooney insisted his lack of success has not been for want of effort.

Speaking at the Football Association's new St George's Park National Football Centre, Rooney claimed he did not see the Capello comments, but admitted: "I can understand and see where people are coming from. But I wasn't in Vegas going out every night drinking and partying. Obviously I

went out one night and that was seen.

"I couldn't train anyway. That is why I had the extra time off. I had to have something done to my toe. It was just a way to relax before I came into training but obviously I can understand.

"I'd have liked to have played better for England. For whatever reasons it hasn't happened but I can hold my head up high and say I've always worked hard, given everything and I'll continue to do that. Hopefully it will come off for us one day.

"I am a confident person. Looking back at games and tournaments, and I know I can do better.

"It's great to play for your country, a great honour, I think I haven't played at my best but being honest as a team we can do better.

"I am not going to win a tournament on my own. We need the whole team. There have been times when we can do better as a team, and times where we have been unlucky. If one of those goes the other way you never know what will happen."

The training centre features photos of international legends such as Bobby Moore and the rest of England's 1966 winning World Cup side.

It is also adorned with inspirational quotes such as Australian swimmer Thorpe's, which reads: "Losing is not coming second. It's getting out of the water knowing you could have done

better."

"I think the place is inspirational," Rooney said. "Walking round you see all the history of England and pictures up and the Ian Thorpe quote stuck in my mind - I think it's quite good.

"I always try to give everything and leave everything on the pitch. Sometimes it happens where you don't play well but you have tried.

"I always feel like I have given everything, whether I have played well or badly. I always try to come off exhausted."

Rooney, 26, also acknowledges he is now one of the senior England players having scored 29 goals in 76 appearances.

He could even lead out the side if Chelsea's Frank Lampard does not recover from a knock while regular captain Steven Gerrard is suspended.

He added: "I haven't heard anything. It's down to the manager. He hasn't said anything. If I do it will be a great honour to captain my country at Wembley, something I will be really proud of.

"I hope I can show my leadership qualities as a senior player. Especially with a lot of young players in the squad.

"I always try to speak to them and offer advice. I always remember Alex Ferguson says that a big help Eric Cantona was to all those younger players at United.

"Hopefully I can bring the best out of them and they can bring the best out of me as well."

A curious venue

Football

AFP, Stockholm

Brazil and Iraq will meet in a full international for the first time this Thursday - but both will be far from home as they take each other on in far-flung Malmö, Sweden.

Iraq are at least banking on some 'home' support to the extent that their compatriots are the largest immigrant community in this, Sweden's third city.

"Organising this historic encounter wasn't easy," says Marc Bliollet of Matchworld Group, who have set up the meeting between the five-time world champions and an Iraq side coached by... former Brazil legend Zico.

The Iraqis turned to Swiss promoter Bliollet with world body FIFA refusing to allow them to play home matches following a chaotic match against Jordan in the city of Erbil, capital of the Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

Iraq were also keen to meet some top-drawer opponents as they gear up for their October 16 World Cup qualifier against Australia in Doha.

Brazil fitted the bill nicely, particularly as they were otherwise free in an international week having already qualified as hosts for 2014.

The arrival here won an August friendly here but also lifted their first World Cup here in 1958 at the Rasunda stadium in nearby Solna.

The logistics make sense for Brazil also in that many of their top stars play for European clubs.

Those stars include Paris Saint Germain defender Thiago Silva but also Real Madrid veteran Kaka, who is slated to win his 83rd cap two years on from his last appearance.

The Brazilian roadshow will move on four days later to a meeting with Japan in Wroclaw, Poland.

The Iraqis have just one Europe-based player in Ahmed Yasin, who plays for Swedish top-flight side Örebro.

Jones eyes Schalke ending

AFP, Berlin

USA midfielder Jermaine Jones has said he plans to finish his career at Champions League side Schalke 04 with his contract set to expire in 2014.

Jones, 30, has made 22 appearances for the USA, despite having won three caps for Germany in 2008 and joined Schalke in 2007 from Eintracht Frankfurt and had a loan spell at Blackburn Rovers last year.

"I have already told Horst Heldt (Schalke's manager), that I can imagine playing for Schalke for another four years," Jones has told German magazine Sport Bild.

"I think I don't want to transfer to any clubs in Europe and I want to end my Bundesliga career with Schalke."

Schalke are currently third in the Bundesliga after seven matches, but the team has been whistled by a group of fans following their 2-2 draw at minnows Fortuna Düsseldorf and then at home to Montpellier in the Champions League.

Cazorla happy at Arsenal

REUTERS, Madrid



Santi Cazorla believes he has taken a step forward in his career by leaving La Liga to join English Premier League club Arsenal and that he is perhaps more valued as a player there than in Spain.

The 27-year-old attacking midfielder, who moved to London from Malaga in August, has made nine appearances and scored two goals at his new club and feels he is settling in well.

"It could be that in the few months I have been there people have been talking a lot more about me," Cazorla told a news conference previewing Spain's World Cup 2014 Group I qualifier away to Belarus on Friday.

"I feel important at Arsenal and I want to keep developing," he added.

"The way Arsenal play and the responsibility they have given me is something I have always sought out.

"I think it's a step forward in my career and I hope to improve a great deal in the future."

Cazorla, who has excellent vision and passing ability and a fierce shot, spent most of his career at Villarreal before joining Malaga last season when he helped the Andalusian side qualify for the Champions League for the first time.

He competes for a place in the Spain team with the likes of Andres Iniesta, David Silva and Cesc Fabregas and is one of the most oft-used substitutes in the world and European champions' talent-packed squad.

"I am happy with my role and it's a privilege to be here," he said of his Spain career.

"Hopefully I can continue to help out as much as possible, I am working every day towards that," he added.



Spain goalkeeper Iker Casillas dives for a ball during a training session at Las Rozas sport city in Madrid yesterday. PHOTO: AFP