



France players jog during a training session at Clairefontaine on Monday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mario to lead attack

Football

AFP, Milan

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli could help Mario Balotelli get over his Manchester City blues by starting the striker in a new two-man attack when the Azzurri host France in a friendly in Parma on Wednesday.

Balotelli returned to the Italy squad for the last batch of World Cup qualifiers against Armenia and Denmark following his absence in September due to an untimely eye operation.

But in England the 22-year-old Italy striker remains an enigma.

Balotelli was left out of Roberto Mancini's 18-man City squad at the weekend for a 2-1 win against Tottenham, prompting suggestions he could be set to quit the English champions.

Indeed, Balotelli attracted more headlines for showing up to training with a Bentley car that had been given a camouflage vinyl wrap treatment.

In Parma, Prandelli could help end Balotelli's frustrations by partnering him with AC Milan sensation Stephan El Shaarawy as Italy test their World Cup credentials against the team they beat to the title in 2006.

At a training session on

Monday, Balotelli played alongside Roma's Mattia Destro, but Prandelli explained: "I tried Balotelli and Destro together because they are the only ones, along with (midfielder, Emanuele) Giaccherini not to have played ninety minutes."

"But the idea is to try to unearth a new attack."

Sitting top of Group B with 10 points from four of their 10 qualifiers, Italy look well poised to qualify for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

But Prandelli's search for the formation that works best in his all new, attack-minded team -- which has replaced Italy's defensive tradition of 'catenaccio' -- continues.

After steering Italy against all odds to the Euro 2012 final, and a subsequent 4-0 defeat to Spain, Prandelli has experimented with 3-5-2 and 4-3-1-2 formations.

He has made only one notable change in defence for Wednesday with Federico Peluso of Atalanta being called up to the squad in place of injured Zenit St Petersburg defender Domenico Criscito.

Peluso, who scored in the 2-0 win over Malta in September, will be vying for a place amid Juventus trio Andrea Barzagli, Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini, as well as Roma's Federico

Balzaretti.

It is Prandelli's midfield, however, that perhaps best exemplifies Italy's new approach.

Andrea Pirlo is the midfield orchestrator who provides quality at set-pieces while Juve teammate Claudio Marchisio, who plays on the right, has hit a rich vein of form and should prove a handful in and around the area.

With Daniele De Rossi on the left and Riccardo Montolivo just behind the strikers, Prandelli has a potent midfield at his disposal, although De Rossi is absent for Wednesday after being handed a three-match ban Monday.

Prandelli said: "At the start of this quest we looked for things that would propel us forward."

"And apart from our tactical game we saw that we have the potential for a really strong midfield. We've tried to develop this to create a more attractive game."

France, who have the same points at the top of Group I as fellow qualifying candidates Spain, are also in a strong qualifying position and should put Prandelli's players to the test.

Les Bleus coach Didier Deschamps is set to go with a four-man defence although questions remain over who will spearhead his attack.

Gerrard set for 100 caps

AFP, London

England captain Steven Gerrard is set to win his 100th cap in Wednesday's friendly away to Sweden after being cleared to travel with the squad following a scan on a knee injury on Monday.

Gerrard suffered his injury during Liverpool's 1-1 Premier League draw with Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Early indications were he would be fit to play in Stockholm and a Football Association statement confirmed his fitness to travel with the England squad.

"Steven Gerrard has been cleared to travel with the England squad to Sweden having undergone a precautionary scan on Monday afternoon," it read.

"The England captain reported to the team hotel following Liverpool's 1-1 draw with Chelsea, and having received positive news is set to win his 100th cap against Sweden on Wednesday evening in Stockholm."

'Panama need 22 men'

Football

REUTERS, Undated

Panama's best hope of ending Spain's year-long unbeaten run would be to field 22 men in their friendly soccer match on Wednesday, coach Julio Cesar DelyValdes said.

"The best thing to take on Spain would be to allow us to play with 22 players instead of 11," Valdes joked in Tuesday's Spanish sports daily Marca.

"Against Spain it is absurd to think of it as just another day and just another team."

"You can't take them head on. Everything we try to do in games will have to be doubled. Twice the attention, the concentration, the effort, helping each other out and so on."

Visitors Spain are the world and European champions. They top the FIFA world rankings and last lost a match in a 1-0 friendly reverse in England a year ago. Since then have won Euro 2012 and they top their group in qualifying for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Panama are ranked 46th in the world but have reached the final stage of the CONCACAF World Cup qualifying competition. They will host a Spain side lacking many of their regulars.

Vicente del Bosque has rested stalwarts such as Xavi, Xabi Alonso, Gerard Pique and Fernando Torres, giving a number of fringe players the chance to impress.

Chelsea's Juan Mata, who was left out of the last three Spain squads, is back in the side and had words of praise for Panama coach Valdes.

"DelyValdes played for Real Oviedo," Mata told a news conference, referring to the Spanish club where he started his playing career.

"I have seen goals he scored in their Tartiere stadium. He is the image of football in this country and I am sure he will imbue his team with the same footballing spirit he had."

More than just friendlies

Football

AFP, Paris

Several high-profile European friendlies are set for Wednesday but friendly would not be the term to be used with how they have been viewed by hard-pressed club managers.

The 2006 World Cup final rematch of France and victors Italy, Germany taking on old rivals the Netherlands and England playing Sweden in a rematch of their thrilling Euro 2012 clash where the English prevailed 3-2 would normally have great appeal.

However, the only appeal the schedule seems to have engendered is an appeal from the club managers for a more reasonable approach to the international schedule while the friendlies have also been further weakened with a whole swathe of withdrawals because of injuries.

Leading the calls for reason to prevail were the usual suspects of Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger and Alex Ferguson of Manchester United, who are even more furious because these friendlies don't even serve a purpose for preparing for 2014 World Cup qualifiers as the next batch are in March.

"Friendly games at this time of year don't mean a thing to me," said Ferguson.

Wenger's main concern is his star midfielder Jack Wilshere who was

recalled by England manager Roy Hodgson, after only playing three matches since a 17-month layoff with injury.

"It is as it is. He has played three games now, and of the three games only one was a full game. He has been out 17 months but I think it's good to have a little break after three games."

FIXTURES

Wednesday (all times GMT):

Italy v France (1950), Sweden v England (1930), Netherlands v Germany (1930), Romania v Belgium (1900), Hungary v Norway (1800), Czech Republic v Slovakia (1630), Israel v Belarus (1700), Luxembourg v Scotland (1915), Turkey v Denmark (2000), Cyprus v Finland (1700), Austria v Ivory Coast (1930), Russia v United States (1500), Liechtenstein v Malta (1800), Andorra v Iceland (1700), Gabon v Portugal (1730), Tunisia v Switzerland (1715), Republic of Ireland v Greece (1945), Panama v Spain (2130), Algeria v Bosnia (1700), Chile v Serbia (1900), Poland v Uruguay

Hodgson for his part tried to calm Wenger's fears over how long Wilshere will play.

"It will be a part of the game -- it won't be a question of him starting the game and playing 90 minutes, which might be a bit much for him at international level at this moment," said Hodgson.

Wenger and Ferguson's criticisms have been the least of Hodgson's problems as he has to do without several key players including Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney, Chelsea players Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole and Arsenal winger Theo Walcott.

The Dutch will also have to do without a United star in the English Premier League's joint leading scorer Robin van Persie, who pulled out because of injury despite showing no signs of it in playing the entire match in the 3-2 win over Aston Villa on Saturday.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar - who has a better record than van Persie for the national side and was unhappy that the United man got the nod ahead of him at the disastrous Euro 2012 campaign - should start up front.

The Germans - who are seeking to put behind them memories of letting slip a 4-0 lead over the Swedes in their World Cup qualifier last month and being held to a 4-4 draw - will also have to improvise up front as Mario Gomez is still coming back from injury and veteran Miroslav Klose picked up an injury at the weekend.

Joachim Loew is likely to put Borussia Dortmund star Marco Reus up front and whilst club managers may denigrate the worth of the friendlies they will not find German manager Oliver Bierhoff a sympathetic listener.



What to WATCH

Channel 9 & BT
Bangladesh v West Indies
First Test, Day 2
Live from 9:30am
BT
Bangladesh Premier League
Team BJMC v Sk Jamal
Live from 4:00pm
Mohammedan v Brothers Union
Live from 6:15pm
ESPN
Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm
Italy v France
Int'l Friendly
Live from 2:00am (Thursday)



DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v West Indies
First Test, Day 2
Time: 9:30am
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, Mirpur
Bangladesh Premier League
Team BJMC v Sk Jamal
Time: 4:00pm
Mohammedan v Brothers Union
Time: 6:15pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

Terry out for weeks

Football

AFP, London

John Terry has suffered "no significant damage" following a scan on his right knee and will be out for weeks rather than months, Chelsea announced Monday.

Injury cut short Terry's return to action during the Blues' 1-1 draw at home to Liverpool in the Premier League on Sunday.

However, a Chelsea statement said Monday: "Today's MRI scans on John Terry's right knee thankfully show no significant damage to the cruciate ligaments."

"Chelsea Football Club's medical team will conduct further tests over the next two or three days once the swelling has subsided to determine how long John will be out, but it will be a matter of weeks not months."

Having to do without Terry for any length of time is still a blow to Chelsea, who have struggled defensively in their captain's domestic four-game absence while serving a racism ban and have slipped from first to third in the Premier League.

Terry is now in line to miss the European champions' potentially vital Champions League Group E game at Juventus, as well as league matches against West Brom and Manchester City.

He could even be a doubt for Chelsea's Club World Cup trip to Japan early next month.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Argentina superstar Lionel Messi (C) is escorted by security personnel after his arrival in Riyadh on Monday. Argentina will play an international friendly against Saudi Arabia today.

Messi gets a gun on his face

INTERNET, Undated

As a new father and someone who very much enjoys life, Lionel Messi probably didn't appreciate the part of his arrival at a Saudi airport on Monday that involved gun barrels in his face.

Argentina travelled to Saudi Arabia for Wednesday's friendly and the team's televised reception at the airport at first appeared to be a rather typical welcoming of a team that includes Leo Messi.

But while his teammates made their way through the crowded terminal with relatively little trouble, Messi himself instantly had an armed entourage.

Messi's armed guards came up against a crush of people trying to get near him, which pushed one guard's assault rifle right up against Messi's shoulder.