



Xavi out for two weeks

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona were dealt a blow on Monday when tests showed Xavi had damaged a hamstring and would be out for around two weeks, although he should be back for the Champions League last-16 first leg at AC Milan on February 20.

The 33-year-old playmaker had withdrawn from the Spain squad to play Uruguay in a friendly in Doha on Wednesday, depriving him of a chance to earn his 120th cap, the Spanish football federation (RFEF) said earlier on Monday.

Xavi played most of Barca's 1-1 La Liga draw at Valencia on Sunday before being replaced by Thiago Alcantara in added time.

"After tests this morning revealed a tear in his left hamstring Xavi will be out for the next 15 days and will miss Barca's next two (La Liga) games against Getafe and Granada," Barcelona said in a statement on their website.

"If his recovery goes as planned, he'll be back for the Champions League game against Milan," the statement added.

Spain, the world and European champions, had already lost Real Madrid midfielder Xabi Alonso because of a groin injury sustained in Saturday's 1-0 defeat at Granada.

Alonso was replaced in the squad by Atletico Madrid's Mario Suarez, a 25-year-old former youth international who has been called up to the senior squad for the first time.

Coach Vicente del Bosque did not bring in anyone to replace Xavi and his position will likely be filled by Andres Iniesta or Cesc Fabregas, his Barca team mates.

Palermo sack Gasperini

REUTERS, Undated

Serie A bottom side Palermo have sacked Gian Piero Gasperini, even though the coach was banned from the dugout in Sunday's 2-1 home defeat by Atalanta following a row with officials in a previous match.

The former Genoa coach, who lasted five games as Inter Milan boss at the start of last season, has paid the price for the well-supported club's poor run of results despite having little influence over Sunday's loss.

"Palermo announce that we have relieved Gian Piero Gasperini of his first-team duties. The name of the new coach will be announced tomorrow," Palermo, more used to battling for the European places in Serie A, said in a statement on Monday.

Italian media reports have said Alberto Malesani, who guided Parma to a 1999 UEFA Cup triumph among his many coaching jobs, is lined up to become Palermo's third coach of the season after Gasperini replaced Giuseppe Sannino in September.



What to WATCH

STAR Sports
Australia v West Indies
Third ODI
Live from 9:20am
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live from 8:30pm
England v Brazil
Int'l Friendly



Sweden superstar Zlatan Ibrahimovic (R) heads the ball during a training session at the Friends Arena in Stockholm yesterday on the eve of their international friendly against Argentina.

PHOTO: AFP

It's all in the mind

Football

AFP, London

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi may owe his trademark feints and body swerves to the fact his brain is busier than that of a less gifted player, according to a study into a footballers' minds.

Researchers at Britain's Brunel University found that highly skilled footballers are able to activate more areas of their brain than novices when an opposing player approaches, enabling them to react to their moves more successfully.

Published in the Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, the research found that experienced players are able to suppress the urge to react instinctively, making them less likely to fall for opponents' attempts to trick them.

attempts to trick them.

As part of the study, 39 players ranging from beginners to semi-professionals lay in an MRI brain scanner and watched clips of a junior international-level player running towards them with the ball.

Occasionally, the oncoming player would produce a deceptive manoeuvre and participants had to decide in which direction they need to move in order to counter.

They were then grouped according to how well they performed in the task, revealing that strong performers were more attuned to the actions and movements of opponents than their less-skilled counterparts.

"Our neuroimaging data clearly shows greater activation of motor and related structures in the brains of expert footballers, compared to novices," said Daniel Bishop from Brunel University.

Test for Germans

AFP, Paris

A French side that has started life in promising fashion under Didier Deschamps will pose a serious test to Germany on Wednesday, with the visitors arriving in the French capital deprived of a host of leading players.

This encounter has been shoehorned into a busy period of the club season, with the Champions League and Europa League knockout stages set to begin next week.

It was no great surprise, then, to see leading German players such as Bayern Munich's Bastian Schweinsteiger and Borussia Dortmund trio Marcel Schmelzer, Marco Reus and Mario Goetze pull out of the game before the squad left Frankfurt for Paris.

Germany coach Joachim Loew has also lost veteran Lazio striker Miroslav Klose, who has a knee injury, leaving Bayern's Mario Gomez as the only fit centre-forward available for a match that precedes a World Cup qualifying double-header against Kazakhstan next month.

Despite that, Loew opted to replace Klose with Dortmund midfielder Sven Bender rather than turn to Bayer Leverkusen's Stefan

Kiessling, the top-scoring German in the Bundesliga.

The visiting team that takes to the field at the Stade de France will have something of an experimental air to it, then, particularly in goal, where Hamburg's Rene Adler is set to play with regular first choice Manuel Neuer rested.

France know how quickly things can change in football, too, given the ups and downs experienced by Les Bleus in the last 12 months.

In February last year, Laurent Blanc's side beat Germany 2-1 in Bremen, a result that created a mood of optimism going into Euro 2012.

A disappointing showing at last summer's finals led to Blanc being replaced by Deschamps, who has added fresh blood to the squad and has overseen a promising start to their World Cup qualifying campaign.

Two wins and then a draw in Spain in October has set them up nicely for next month's clash with Georgia and the rematch with the reigning European and world champions.

Deschamps is also looking for his team to build on the 2-1 victory in Italy in their last outing in November.

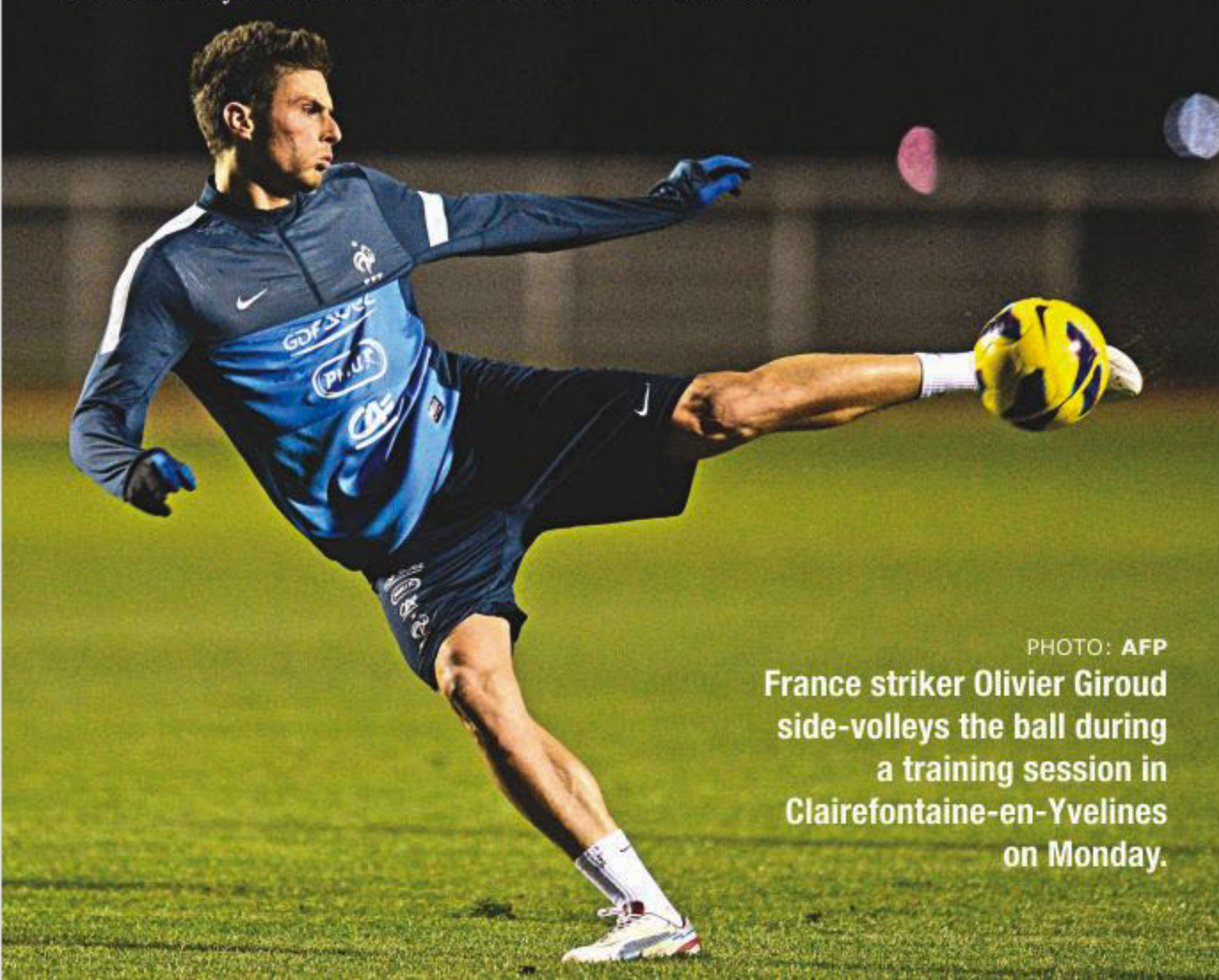


PHOTO: AFP
France striker Olivier Giroud side-volleys the ball during a training session in Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines on Monday.

Theo's chance at new role

Football

AFP, London

Theo Walcott hopes injuries to strikers Jermain Defoe and Daniel Sturridge will give him a chance to spearhead England's attack in Wednesday's prestige friendly with Brazil at Wembley.

Having been handed opportunities to play as a central forward by Arsenal this season, Walcott has responded with 18 goals to become the club's leading scorer.

The 23-year-old has scored just four goals in 30 games for England, but he believes his club form could persuade national coach Roy Hodgson to hand him the central striking role he covets.

"Things are going quite well for Arsenal on the right but Daniel and Jermain are both out so there is an opportunity (with England)," he said.

"That is the manager's choice. I trained up front today (Monday) with Wayne (Rooney), so you never know.

"I will play anywhere for England and Arsenal but I do believe I'm a striker and I'm sure in the next few years I'll be playing (there) a bit more regularly."

Manchester United midfielder Michael Carrick has also withdrawn from the England squad through injury, although he was not likely to start the game.

Ashley Cole is in line to become only the seventh England player to receive 100 caps, after Peter Shilton, David Beckham, Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton, Billy Wright and Steven Gerrard.

The Chelsea left-back has not always been a popular figure with England fans, but Walcott says he remains a hugely influential member of the changing room.

"Ashley is massively important. He is so experienced and has won many things. A lot of players look up to him," Walcott said.

"He is a strong character. He can deal with anything. It is all about the game. Nothing fazes him. He is very concentrated."

Wednesday's game forms part of

the celebrations to mark the 150th birthday of the Football Association and will be England's first outing since a 4-1 friendly loss to Sweden last November.

The trip to Wembley will be Luiz Felipe Scolari's first assignment in his second spell as Brazil coach, after he replaced the sacked Mano Menezes in November.

With Brazil already assured of a place at the 2014 World Cup as hosts, Scolari's task is to shape a team capable not just of winning the tournament, but of winning in the swash-buckling style with which Brazilian football is synonymous.

There is certainly plenty of creativity in the squad he has named for the game against England, with young talents Neymar, Oscar and Lucas Moura included alongside the recalled pair of Ronaldinho and Luis Fabiano.

Scolari, who led Brazil to their fifth World Cup title in Japan and South Korea in 2002, called up just one uncapped player in the form of 29-year-old Bayern Munich centre-back Dante.

5 classic matches

Football

AFP, London

England face Brazil in a friendly at Wembley on Wednesday as part of the Football Association's 150th anniversary celebrations. Here AFP looks at five classic encounters between the teams.

Brazil 1 England 0 (1970 World Cup)
Alf Ramsey's England, then the defending champions, were beaten by Brazil's finest ever line-up in a group match in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Gordon Banks made a stunning save to keep out Pele's powerful header, but Jairzinho netted a powerful winner and Brazil went on to win the tournament.

Brazil 0 England 2 (1984 friendly)
John Barnes scored one of the greatest goals ever to grace the legendary Maracana stadium as the England winger weaved past half the Brazil team before slotting home a cool finish.

Bobby Robson's team went on to clinch their first win on Brazilian soil when Barnes turned provider for Mark Hateley to head the second goal.

England 1 Brazil 3 (1995 friendly)

Ronaldo announced his arrival on the international scene with his first Brazil goal as the visitors ended England's four-year unbeaten home record.

Graeme Le Saux's stunning volley had given Terry Venables' side a first-half lead, but Ronaldo inspired Brazil to their first win over England for 14 years.

England 1 Brazil 2 (2002 World Cup quarterfinal)
Ronaldinho took centre-stage as Brazil eliminated Sven Goran Eriksson's team in Shizuoka, Japan.

Michael Owen had put England ahead but Rivaldo equalised after a fine solo run by Ronaldinho, who then embarrassed England goalkeeper David Seaman with a curling free-kick and Brazil moved on to secure their fifth World Cup triumph.

England 1 Brazil 1 (2007 friendly)
England's first match at Wembley, after a seven-year exile to rebuild the national stadium, finished in frustration as Brazil snatched a late equaliser.

David Beckham created England's second half opener, sending over a free-kick for captain John Terry to power in a header. But Diego Ribas rose to head home Gilberto Silva's cross in stoppage-time.

Pressure on Singapore

Football

AFP, Singapore

Singapore's reputation for low corruption came under fire Tuesday after revelations that a criminal gang based in the city-state rigged hundreds of football matches in Europe and elsewhere.

While police had no immediate comment and some of the country's state-linked media downplayed the news, some Singaporeans expressed shock and analysts said the scandal could harm the wealthy island's squeaky-clean image.

In just the latest indication that Singapore is at the heart of a global match-fixing empire, European police said they had smashed a network rigging hundreds

of games, including in the Champions League and World Cup qualifiers.

Europol said a five-country probe had identified 380 suspicious matches targeted by a Singapore-based betting cartel, whose illegal activities stretched to players, referees and officials across the world.

Singapore's role in international match-rigging has long been clear, with Wilson Raj Perumal jailed in Finland in 2011 and another Singaporean, Tan Seet Eng or Dan Tan, wanted in Italy over the "calcioscommesse" scandal.

But the latest news shone a harsh light on the problem and raised potential problems for Singapore's reputation, as well as questions about how authorities are dealing with the match-fixing syndicates, analysts said.

Mallorca hire Manzano

AFP, Madrid

Real Mallorca said Tuesday they have reached an agreement for Gregorio Manzano to take over as coach, a day after they fired Joaquin Caparros.

The Liga club made the announcement in a brief statement on their website.

A run of 13 defeats in 17 league games that saw the Islanders drop to second bottom in the table ultimately cost Caparros his job.

Club president Lorenzo Serra Ferrer said Monday a change was needed to give them a chance of survival come the end of the season.

Manzano, who has been Mallorca manager on two previous occasions, has now been entrusted with that challenge and will be formally presented on Tuesday afternoon.

Ronaldinho surprised by recall

AFP, London

Ronaldinho admits he did not expect to be recalled by Brazil, but says he believes the squad he has returned to possesses sufficient quality to win the 2014 World Cup on home soil.

After a year in the international wilderness, the 32-year-old forward is expected to feature in Brazil's friendly game against England at Wembley on Wednesday.

He has been handed a recall by new Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, who has returned to the role 11 years after leading the Selecao to their fifth World Cup crown in Japan and South Korea in 2002.

Ronaldinho surprisingly joined Atletico Minero in June last year and was one of the stars of the Brazilian championship as the side from Belo Horizonte finished runners-up behind Fluminense.

His performances saw him named in the team of the season, alongside Brazil team-mates Neymar, Paulinho, Lucas Moura and Fred, but he says his return to the national set-up still came as a surprise.

"It wasn't in my plans," he told reporters on Tuesday.

"I played a very good season last year so I was hoping for it and I'm very glad that it came true.

"There's great pedigree in our team. I think we have all possibilities to win the World Cup."