

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES



Scotland's rise up the rankings could prove to be a double-edged sword in the race to South Africa, says Michael Grant

ALITTLE after 4pm this afternoon Scotland's clear run to the 2010 World Cup will become cluttered with obstacles. If the feelgood factor just about survived last week's elimination from Euro 2008 that was because of the widespread assumption that a young, talented and maturing squad was in place to deliver a place at the next World Cup finals. Mentally there is a temptation to feel Scotland already has its place in South Africa.

There is good cause to be optimistic, especially given the fact there is the leg-up of being among the second seeds having been fourth in the murderous draw to reach Euro 2008. But the three-flight journey taken by Alex McLeish, SFA chief executive Gordon Smith and president George Peat to reach Durban for today's draw was symbolic. Scotland still has a long way to go to get to the World Cup.

All the hard work lies ahead of the manager and his team and there may be some nasty surprises ahead. Consider this pessimistic possibility: Scotland could once again be drawn in a group with World Cup holders Italy and, after finishing second behind them, then meet England in a two-legged play-off (an England revitalised and repaired by Jose Mourinho, Martin O'Neill or some other proper manager, that is, not Steve McClaren's team of patsies) and be knocked out again.

Just because Scotland got a horrible section from the Euro 2008 qualifying draw doesn't mean they won't get another unlucky one today.

McLeish, his thoughts still racing with notions of bias and favouritism towards Italy by last week's Spanish match officials, sounded a little rash when he said he would like to draw Italy again to "redress the balance".

Having said all that, the fact remains that as second seeds Scotland should get an easier passage this time. They might draw Italy or France again but crucially not both of them. And although World Cup quarter-finalists Ukraine are among the third seeds again, that pot also contains the sort of opposition – Northern Ireland? Finland? – McLeish would take any day of the week.

The manager has taken to referring to Scotland as potential "scalps" for other nations who will be wary after the victories over France and the other fine results in the recent qualifiers. That may make teams more defensive, certainly when they come to Hampden, and traditionally that has proved

to be troublesome for Scotland to overcome. They are likely to regularly encounter sides who will try to frustrate them and settle for a point.

"Maybe teams will change their tactics against us, maybe they will be up for it more, maybe be more motivated," said McLeish. "You can sense the different edge our players have and I imagine other teams will feel that when they play against us. We have earned that right now, we deserve that and it's something we have to handle. We handled all the things that were thrown at us in the Euro 2008 campaign."

Scotland grew and evolved as the qualifiers unfolded and reinvented themselves through the two wins over France, the home win over Ukraine, the two creditable performances against Italy and the general consistency of

You can sense the different edge our players have and I imagine other teams will feel that when they play against us

their other results (except for the defeat in Georgia). Some of the fluid attacking moves in the second half against Italy eight days ago were those of a bubbly, confident side; they may have been incapable of playing at that level at the start of the campaign.

"We sometimes get a wee bit uptight because we are told we don't have as much technical ability as the foreigners," McLeish continued.

"When you are constantly told that, there can be a bit of anxiety when you get the ball. But we have tried to tell them that there is real composure and confidence in their own use of the ball. We have to keep encouraging that with the younger ones."

"We don't get a lot of chance to work on skills. I am not saying to club coaches that they have to improve players' skills, I'm not giving instructions out to anyone. But I would encourage players to keep passing it and to not bottle it or to think that we are not as good as the foreigners."

The World Cup qualifiers begin in

September, 10 months away. Whether McLeish is there for them will depend on the quality of offers he may receive from clubs in the English Premier League or Europe. Fitness and form permitting, the squad itself will be relatively unchanged. Of the older players – Graham Alexander, 36, Christian Dailly, 34, Steven Pressley, 34 – most are on the fringes of things and only David Weir, 37, is a first pick.

McLeish is in no mood to rush any of the old boys away, mindful that Motherwell once suffered when he tried something similar as manager there. "I don't see any need to do anything drastic. I know the consequences of losing your experienced players and trying to rebuild again," he said.

"I have to consider if there is a better alternative to the player who is already in the position."

The Hearts captain Christophe Berra, 22, has "presence and potential" according to McLeish but will have to wait for an opening at centre-half. "I don't see any need to say it's the end for Davie Weir because I have still to see anyone who is better. He has been very influential in the Scotland set-up, both as a player that the guys look up to and also in his performances."

"If the young players get precious, get carried away with themselves, you only have to tell them to look at the humility of Davie Weir as a guy who has every right to shout and boast from the rooftops but instead continues to be an exemplary example."

An example of another sort – namely of how a player can completely reinvent himself – has been Alan Hutton, who turns 23 on Friday. McLeish and Rangers manager Walter Smith can barely pass a journalist these days without being asked for an opinion on the right-back who has been born again in 2007. "He is like a runaway truck just now," said McLeish. "It's like the wee comic book character who used to be my hero, Billy's Boots, who had a pair of boots on that would take him into the right position and take him past people."

"We always knew he was a great athlete and it was about improving that wee bit technically, confidence-wise and fire-in-the-belly wise, which he has excelled in. I look at a lot of teams in the Premiership and I wonder if they have better than Hutton."

"He can be an inspiration for our other young players. Not everyone has the same athleticism as Alan Hutton but you have guys like wee Scott Brown as well. They have broken through in this campaign and they have to be an inspiration for other young boys."

As for everyone else, inspiration may be delivered this afternoon, and perspiration too, when Scotland learn the company they will be keep on the road to Africa.

THE 2010 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING DRAW



FIFA

For the Good of the Game



WHERE IS IT HAPPENING? Durban, South Africa

WHEN IS IT HAPPENING? Starts at 3pm UK time today. Europe section expected to begin around 4pm.

WHO WILL BE THERE? South Africa President Thabo Mbeki, Fifa President Sepp Blatter (pictured), former players including George Weah and Marcel Desailly and representatives of more than 110 Fifa associations. Fifa general secretary Jerome Valcke will actually make the draw.

HOW WILL IT WORK? The Asian section will be drawn first, and then CONCACAF, Europe and finally Africa (qualifiers in South America and Oceania are already underway).

There will be 13 places at the finals for European countries. Nine groups will be drawn (eight containing six teams and one containing just five). The nine group winners will qualify and eight runners-up will go through to four play-offs for the last four places. The runners-up up with the poorest group record will be eliminated.

The first qualifying ties will be played in September, 2008.

WHERE CAN I SEE IT? Sky Sports News and Eurosport. Updates on BBC Radio Scotland. Live on fifa.com

THE SEEDING POTS (based on Fifa world ranking)

POT ONE	POT TWO	POT THREE
Italy	England	Norway
Spain	Romania	Ukraine
Germany	SCOTLAND	Serbia
Czech Republic	Turkey	Denmark
France	Bulgaria	Northern Ireland
Portugal	Russia	Rep of Ireland
Holland	Poland	Finland
Croatia	Sweden	Switzerland
Greece	Israel	Belgium

POT FOUR	POT FIVE	POT SIX
Slovakia	Georgia	Liechtenstein
Bosnia-Herz.	Albania	Estonia
Hungary	Slovenia	Malta
Moldova	Latvia	Luxembourg
Wales	Iceland	Montenegro
FYR Macedonia	Armenia	Andorra
Belarus	Austria	Faroe Islands
Lithuania	Kazakhstan	San Marino
Cyprus	Azerbaijan	

DREAM DRAW (group of five): Greece, Scotland, Belgium, Cyprus, Austria

NIGHTMARE DRAW (group of six): Italy, Scotland, Ukraine, Slovakia, Kazakhstan, Montenegro

MYSTERY AT HEART OF FIFA



The appointment of Jerome Valcke just doesn't add up, writes Andrew Jennings

ONE too many last night? Feeling a bit rough? Well, you might want to reach for the Iru Bru and try and clear your head because the greatest football mystery of our time is about to appear on a screen near you.

For football fans it's the preliminary draw for the next World Cup at the glass-lidded Conference Centre overlooking Durban Bay. For the nabobs of Fifa it's something else; the defiant enthronement, against all odds, of Fifa's new general secretary, Jerome Valcke.

It's only 11 months since Valcke was topped, tailed and tormented in a New York court, the judge certifying Fifa officials serial liars. That was Valcke's cv down the toilet. Today is the first day of the new life of Fifa's comeback kid. The mystery is, how did he pull it off?

Bestriding the widest stage you ever saw is Herr Joseph S. Blatter and his new representative on earth, Valcke the debonair snake-oil salesman. What hold does the mendacious Valcke have over the wily Blatter, to prise out of him the game's No 2 job?

General secretary Valcke is supervising the draw, 170 countries are taking the television feed. Watch the fond glances between Sepp and Jerome, stare harder as they disengage from each family-of-football embrace.

Yes, there's a helluva back story. Wind the clock back, it's Spring 2001.

The sports marketing company that pays hefty bribes to certain of Fifa's leaders in return for billion-dollar World Cup contracts sinks into insolvency. In the 1990s the ISL company has parted with nearly £20 million in kickbacks. The well is dry.

Along comes Monsieur Valcke and a band of entrepreneurs from the Vivendi company in Paris. They will buy the wreckage of ISL and its dreamy World Cup television and marketing contracts. But, first, due diligence, as the forensic accountants call it, to see what assets are left and how the company got its business.

Valcke and his team look hard at the books, have exchanges behind closed doors with Fifa, then suddenly go home to Paris, leaving ISL to crash. There's never been an explanation of what went wrong.

Recently, an envelope sidled into my letterbox. Inside, a never previously revealed, volcanic letter dispatched by Herr Blatter to Monsieur Valcke, during the negotiations to take over Fifa's contracts. Such violent language. Terrible threats. Surely, these two could never work together again. But what lay behind the rage?

After the crash I went to the first creditors' meeting in a salon in the city of Zug, cornered the liquidator and secured the easy admission that he had found evidence of dirty money washing around ISL's basement and out to Fifa officials.

The bribes went to offshore companies and accounts connected to

some members of Fifa's executive committee. Any trainee accountant would have found the money-trail his first morning excavating ISL.

Did Valcke and his team find the same evidence? How could they not? Everybody in the sports marketing loop knew, had gossiped for years about the screamingly obvious.

So is this what Herr Blatter is referring to in his letter, dated April 30, 2001? He shrieks at Valcke, "the position of Fifa in no way will ever be altered by any threats or attempts of blackmailing".

Blackmailing? What's going on here? Then Blatter raves about "unacceptable threats" to "certain gentlemen of Fifa". Letter in hand, I called some sources, they said that the French guys had wanted higher commissions on sales than Fifa granted ISL and were piling on pressure to get their way.

With the letter were two internal memos from Fifa's Zurich lawyers to Herr Blatter. They were getting their ears bitten by Alain Gloor, a lawyer for the Frenchmen. If Fifa didn't agree, he warned, his clients owned "a media company which had at its disposal all the resources necessary for presenting events to the world at large".

Were the blazers at Fifa House getting the point? If they didn't concede: "there could ensue extremely serious consequences for both Fifa and certain individuals at Fifa."

Whoa! Were those embarrassing bribes being put into play? Who were these "certain individuals at Fifa"?

The French team talked the talk – then they walked. Blatter set up Fifa's in-house marketing company. Two Christmases passed. Then, mysteriously, Blatter picked Valcke to head it.

Valcke was a disaster. When he misled MasterCard in contract negotiations Fifa had to pay \$90m to settle the inevitable lawsuit.

Asked last month if he had ever noticed corruption at Fifa, Valcke said he had never seen any. It was all a mystery to him. I've put in formal requests to Blatter and general secretary Valcke to discuss these blackmail allegations and the mystery of how they got over that nasty spat. They don't want to talk.

More about the marketing bribes will be revealed this spring in a Swiss court when ISL executives stand trial accused of defrauding Fifa of nearly £50m. Many of the valuable rights formerly held by ISL are now owned by the Infront company whose CEO is Philippe Blatter, nephew of the Fifa president. Infront can be found in the same office block once occupied by ISL.

Andrew Jennings is author of *FOUL! The Secret World of Fifa: Bribes, Vote-rigging and Ticket Scandals*, Harper Sport £8.99. The Fifa documents referred to in this article can be downloaded at www.transparencynsport.org