

Ronaldo the merciless

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Ronaldo, who cemented his reputation as one of the game's leading players during his spectacular season at Barcelona seven years ago, says he has little sympathy for his former team's domestic problems.

The Brazilian international, who will face his old club for the first time since moving to Real from Inter Milan at the start of the season, said was unmoved by the possibility that defeat at the Bernabeu on Saturday might drag the Catalan giants into a messy relegation battle.

"I think it is unlikely, but it could happen," he told the Real Madrid website on Friday. "In European football there are quite a few cases of historic sides that have dropped down into the second division."

When asked if he would like to see his former team relegated, the World and European Player of the Year commented: "I'm not really bothered."

"At the moment they are our opponents and I don't really worry too much about them. I am focused on my own team and want to do everything I can to help them win."

"Real are a bigger team than Barcelona, although Barca are a big team too, but historically they just haven't enjoyed the success or the trophies that Real have."

Ronaldo said that he was particularly keen to score against his old team.

"I have a special motivation to score in a big game against Barcelona and I



am really looking forward to doing so," he said.

Despite a resounding 4-2 defeat at Real Sociedad last weekend, Real lead the first division by three points from the Basque side and second-placed Deportivo Coruna.

Barcelona trail a distant 24 points back in 12th place, only six points above the relegation zone with nine matches left to the end of the season.

Both sides, though, having been going well in Europe and if they win through their respective Champions League quarter-final ties they will face each other in the semis.

Real beat Manchester United 3-1 in their first leg match at the Bernabeu, while Barca held Juventus to a 1-1 draw at the Stadio Delle Alpi.

Premiership on De Boer's mind

Football

AFP, London

Barcelona defender Frank De Boer said he will know in the coming fortnight whether to accept an offer to join Blackburn.

The English Premiership side is keen to sign the 32-year-old Dutchman, who in turn is tempted by a move to England - but only once the situation at Barcelona becomes clearer.

The crisis-hit Catalans are going through one of their worst seasons in recent history and De Boer, who has not been offered a contract extension, wants to know if he is among those players facing the chop.

"The players want to know what is to happen, I don't want to wait any longer," said De Boer, whose contract expires at the end of the season.

"First I want to stay here but then if it is good for me and for my family then I would like Blackburn as it is a good club with a nice pitch and a good crowd."

De Boer's future is likely to be decided after Barcelona next two games - against Real Madrid Saturday and Juventus on Tuesday - both of which are likely to prompt the club into

deciding who gets the chop at the Nou Camp.

A morale-boosting win against league leaders Real would help



FRANK DE BOER

appease the unforgiving Barcelona fans, while victory against Juventus could see them through to the semi-finals of the Champions League - their only potential route to the lucrative competition next season as they currently sit 12th in the league.

De Boer added: "But first I want to wait, I expect to hear something by the end of the month. I am very honoured that they (Blackburn) want to have me, it is great that there is interest in me."

Desailly eyes Euro glory

Football

AFP, Paris

French skipper Marcel Desailly on Thursday brushed aside fears over his international future and set his sights on helping his country defend their European title in Portugal in 2004.

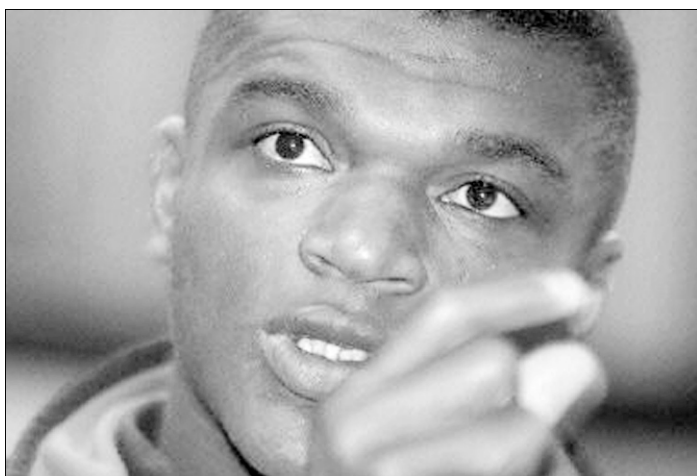
The 34-year-old, who missed the last two Euro 2004 qualifying victories over Malta and Israel through injury, is pinning hopes of a recall to the national team when coach Jacques Santini names the squad to face Egypt next Thursday.

If he plays, the Chelsea defender will set a new national record of 104 caps beating the previous mark of 103 held by 1998 World Cup winning skipper Didier Deschamps.

"The logic will be that I will stop in 2004," said Desailly who has seen Real Madrid's Zinedine Zidane take over as captain in the last two matches.

"But frankly why speak of these things. My season has gone well and I will continue to play until the coach decides otherwise."

"I will stop if I feel that I am losing a little passion, if the desire is no longer



MARCEL DESAILLY

there. I think I will stop when I decide it."

Desailly, in an interview with French sports daily L'Equipe, added that he was happy he decided to keep playing international football after the 2002 World Cup finals despite the holders' miserable form which saw them knocked out at the first round stage.

"We took a bashing from the media but I and others continued because it

was a way of helping the young players," added Desailly faces two tough English Premiership matches against Aston Villa on Saturday and Everton on Monday.

The veteran player, dogged by knee and hip injuries in recent weeks, knows that those games will be crucial if he is to win back his place in the French side.

"I know the rules. My selection depends on my performances with my club, out on the pitch."

Premiership Hoddle gives in

Football

AFP, London

Tottenham manager Glenn Hoddle admitted his side's hopes of European football next season had disappeared after Friday's 2-0 home defeat by Manchester City which ended with the players being booed off the pitch.

"I said that we would need maximum points over Easter to put pressure on the teams above us but looking at it now after this result it is going to be exceedingly difficult," Hoddle acknowledged.

Two goals in the first 20 minutes secured the three points for City with French defender David Sommeil and Joey Barton claiming their first goals for the club.

City boss Kevin Keegan said his team, who had won only once in their last eight outings, had proved they were

a better than recent performances have suggested.

"We started off like a team who wanted to shove the criticism we've had back at people," Keegan said.

"My one criticism is that we got ourselves into some great positions, but chose the wrong options when we broke at times. We have been a bit Jekyll and Hyde this season. I don't know who is the good guy, Jekyll or Hyde, but for about five weeks we have been the worse guy of the two."

"I told the lads that some of the criticism has been justified, but the one thing they shouldn't be criticised for is looking like a team who's season has finished - that's a terrible thing to say about one of my teams."

"I said I can't keep defending them, but they came up with the right attitude and we had the right balance in the side. We caught Spurs on an off day and we are only two points behind them now, and three of our four remaining games are at home."

Andersson to quit in 2004

REUTERS, Stockholm

Former Swedish international Patrik Andersson, 31, will end his career when his contract with Barcelona expires in 2004, a Swedish newspaper reported on Friday.

"I'll play one more year at Barcelona. Then I'll quit," the daily Expressen quoted Andersson, a central defender, as saying.

"My contract will expire and I've been abroad for a long time...It feels as if Barcelona will be my last club," he said.

With 96 international caps and a career at Bayern Munich (1999-2001), Borussia Moenchengladbach (1993-'99), and Blackburn Rovers (1992-'93) behind him, Andersson is one of Sweden's most experienced soccer professionals.

Dennis Gunner another season

AFP, London

Dennis Bergkamp, who has been mulling over his future at English Premiership side Arsenal, looks likely to stay at Highbury for one more season.

The 33-year-old Dutchman had been considering a move back to his native Holland when his contract runs out in the summer but made known his desire to stay at the club recently in their official magazine.

That proved enough for Wenger, who is likely to open talks with the inspirational veteran striker once the reigning champions' title campaign comes to an end.

"Dennis has said that he wants to stay here. I want him to stay for another year and to finish his career here," Wenger said before brushing off Bergkamp's mediocre form against arch-rivals Manchester United in their midweek draw.

Bayern-Kirch WC scam

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich and a company linked to media mogul Leo Kirch offered financial kick-backs to four small national federations in an effort to influence the 2006 World Cup hosting vote, a respected German newspaper alleged on Saturday.

According to Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Bayern agreed to play friendlies in the countries with the Kirch company footing the bill for TV rights in exchange for support in the FIFA vote in which Germany surprisingly beat South Africa by a single vote.

On Saturday, organisers of the 2006 World Cup told Reuters that it had been "normal business" for Bayern to negotiate deals of this kind around the world that they said had not affected the vote.

A spokesman for the organising committee added that he saw no irregularities that a company linked to the troubled Kirch empire had struck deals with small national federations in an apparent effort to persuade them to vote for Germany.

Germany beat favourites South Africa by one vote, 12-11, in July 2000 to

win the right to stage the 2006 finals.

"It seems to me that it's all normal business," spokesman Gerd Graus said after reading Saturday's article in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

The Munich daily, citing sources within the Kirch-related company involved - Switzerland-based marketing agency CWL - said the federations of Malta, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tunisia had each received between 250,000 dollars and 300,000 dollars from TV rights for friendlies Bayern, Germany's biggest draw, were to play in their countries.

The newspaper said the deals were struck shortly before Germany won the vote by FIFA members for 2006.

"I see nothing unusual," said Graus.

"It's up to Bayern to decide where they play friendlies. Other top European clubs play friendlies in exotic locations."

The four-time European champions played against Thailand in June 2000 and Malta and Tunis club Esperance in January 2001. They did not play Trinidad.

Graus said he doubted that those friendlies were related to Germany's effort to win the vote for 2006.

"Tunisia voted against Germany," he said.

Sueddeutsche Zeitung said CWL had dedicated 3.5 million dollars to its

lobbying campaign to support Germany's bid.

Kirch had bought the world rights for the 2006 World Cup in 1996 and the newspaper said it wanted to see the event staged in Germany, rather than in South Africa, for obvious commercial reasons.

"Kirch knew a vote for Germany would be worth gold," Sueddeutsche Zeitung wrote.

Bayern made headlines recently over another controversial deal with a Kirch group company, KirchMedia.

The scandal broke in February when Bayern admitted having received 21.5 million euros (23.45 million dollars) from KirchMedia through a secret contract -- on top of television cash passed on to all German professional clubs via the Bundesliga.

The deal collapsed after Bundesliga right-holders KirchMedia went into insolvency proceedings last year with huge losses.

The row seemed settled after Bayern agreed last week to pay three million euros to the German Football League (DFL).

But the club then fell out with the DFL because of a statement by the body in charge of German professional soccer that described Bayern's attitude as "morally reprehensible."



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester City's former Danish international keeper Peter Schmeichel celebrates after his side took the lead against Tottenham Hotspur in their Premiership encounter on Friday.

Fergie lets rip

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has unleashed an astonishing broadside at title rivals Arsenal as the row over Sol Campbell's sending off for elbowing United forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer refused to die down.

Campbell is set to be banned for four crucial end-of-season matches as a

result of the red card he received in the 2-2 draw between the title rivals at Highbury on Wednesday.

And Ferguson has been infuriated by Arsenal's claims that the England defender had been harshly treated and suggestions Solskjaer may have contributed to the sending off.

"We had a player who was badly hurt and his nose was bleeding after the incident yet Arsenal players are attacking Ole," Ferguson said.

"Thierry Henry even had a punch at him while he was on the ground. We have a player who is lucky not to have a broken nose and all the furore is about

the guy who has elbowed your player and Arsenal trying to get him off the suspension!"

"And for Arsene Wenger to turn round and say it was a Manchester United player he would get off is ridiculous."

"Arsenal have had three players up before the FA in the last year get off for elbowing. So what are they going on about?"

"I don't hear one person at Arsenal asking how Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is. A player who could have had a damaged nose and all they are going on about is getting their player off the hook."

Djorkaeff's threat

Football

AFP, London

Former World Cup winner Youri Djorkaeff says he will quit Bolton if the English Premiership side fail to come out top on a potential second straight fight against relegation.

Forward Djorkaeff, an integral part of France's World Cup and European Championship winning teams, admits he would rather return home to his native France - and give up football rather than play in the First Division.

"I think if we go down I'll stop playing. I have another year left on my contract and, of course, I'd listen to what the manager (Sam Allardyce) wanted."

"But I don't think I'd be good playing in a First Division promotion season. I think it's likely I'd return to France but not to play," Djorkaeff told the Daily Mail on Saturday.

Bolton currently sit fourth from bottom of the Premiership and, like last season, are risking another relegation dogfight despite holding a three-point cushion over West Ham and boasting superior goals difference.

A return to the First Division would surely signal the end of 35-year-old Djorkaeff's stay as he is the club's highest earner and his salary would

likely prove too much for club coffers.

Nevertheless, Djorkaeff - who moved to the club on a free transfer from Bundesliga outfit Kaiserslautern and is revered by the Wanderers' fans - is confident of avoiding that scenario.

"When you look at how we've played this season it's crazy to even think we're in this position," he added.



YOURI DJORKAEFF

"We should be playing now for a place in the Intertoto Cup, not for survival in the Premiership."

"If we stay up then I know that next season will be different and that's exciting. We have a good group here. If we get good results in the next couple of games we'll be fine."