

Guess who loves you?

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United have stabbed David Beckham in the back by trying to force him into a money-spinning move to Barcelona that he does not want, British newspapers claimed on Wednesday.

But while the tabloids were unanimous in their fury over what they see as a tawdry betrayal of the England captain, the reaction of United fans was surprisingly muted.

Jules Spencer, chairman of the Manchester United Supporters Association, said most fans would back the judgement of Sir Alex Ferguson, the manager who has made United the dominant force in English football over the last decade.

Spencer said: "If he is being sold for financial reasons then there will be an outcry."

"But if he is being sold to strengthen the team, then most fans will back Ferguson's judgement."

United announced on Tuesday that they had reached agreement with Joan Laporta, who is bidding to become Barcelona's new president, to sell the 28-year-old midfielder to the Catalan club.

But less than two hours later, Beckham's advisors issued a statement accusing Laporta of using the player as a "pawn" in the presidential election battle and said they had no plans to talk to him.

Laporta counter-claimed that he had already begun negotiations with SFX, Beckham's management company, and that by agreeing a deal first with United he was scrupulously following the rules governing international transfer deals.

The British press took a different view of the affair with most of the tabloids accusing Ferguson of sanctioning a move designed to force Beckham to quit the club where he has spent his entire career.

"Red Bully" was the front-page headline in the Daily Mirror, above a picture of a scarlet-faced Ferguson on holiday in the south of France.

"Sun-burned Sir Alex smirks hours before 'selling' David Beckham without even telling him," the caption to the picture read. "What a way to treat an England hero."

The Sun claimed that Beckham had been told to agree to the Barcelona move or spend the remaining two years of his United contract rotting on the bench at Old Trafford.

"Knifed in the Barc" was how the Sun's front-page headline writers summed it up. The Daily Mail called it: "A 30-million-pound kick in the teeth."

Beckham's father, Ted, was widely quoted as making a thinly veiled attack on Ferguson for forcing

his son out of the club he loves. "One man in particular - and I'm not going to name him - is trying to force him out and David will be really, really upset," Ted Beckham said.

Ferguson has been a major figure in Beckham's life. It was the Scot who decided to sign the London-born Manchester United fan as a 15-year-old and then gambled on promoting him to the first team three years later.

Only this week Beckham described Ferguson as a "father figure." But there is no doubt that their relationship has deteriorated over the last few months.

Rumours of a transfer began in earnest in February, when Beckham was left with a gashed forehead after Ferguson kicked a boot across the Old Trafford dressing room in a fury over an FA Cup defeat by Arsenal.

Since then the manager has seemed intent on underlining that Beckham is an expendable asset by leaving the midfielder on the bench for key games against Arsenal, Liverpool and Real Madrid.

Although the press were united in their condemnation of United's handling of the affair, there was disagreement about what happens next.

While some pundits have concluded that Beckham will be forced to choose between moving to Barcelona, who cannot offer him Champions League football next season, and tugging it out at Old Trafford, there were also predictions that Real Madrid would step into the fray.

The Guardian said United's announcement of the Barca deal was calculated to alert Real and both the Milan clubs to the fact that they need to move quickly.

The paper claimed Real were ready to begin talks with Beckham next week while the Daily Mirror said Real Madrid president Florentino Perez had spent Tuesday finalising the terms of an offer.

Beckham admitted in April that he was flattered by speculation linking him to Madrid and acknowledged that any player would relish the opportunity to play in their all-star side.

But while that may be his personal preference, there is a theory that United would prefer Beckham to go to Barcelona rather than see him use his glamour to help Real mount a challenge to their status as the world's leading football brand.

Although Real are huge in Latin America, they trail United in the much bigger market of Asia, a region in which Beckham enjoys iconic status.

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PHOTO: REUTERS
Javier Saviola (No 9) the Argentina striker, being congratulated by team captain Javier Zanetti on scoring against South Korea at Sangam World Cup Stadium in Seoul yesterday.

Friendly Saviola bails Argentina

Football

AFP, Seoul

A disputed goal by Barcelona striker Javier Saviola earned an experimental Argentina side a 1-0 win over battling South Korea at the World Cup stadium here Wednesday.

Saviola scored on 43 minutes when he tapped home from close range after captain Javier Zanetti fired in a swift pass across the goalmouth.

South Korean appeals for offside were turned down but their case looked strong.

It was the third goal in his last three games for Argentina for the 21-year-old Barcelona striker and a big let-down for the South Koreans who had been supplying most of the attacking moves.

The listless and disorganized South Korea who suffered a 2-0 defeat on Sunday to Uruguay were nowhere to be seen against Argentina.

In the final minute captain Yoo Sang-Chul was still trying for the equaliser - and came close with a header - typifying the South Korean never-say-die spirit.

South Korean coach Humberto Coelho made four changes to Sunday's starting line-up and the side showed more balance, the defence was more solid and the midfield vastly more creative.

That began to come through as early as the 13th minutes when

Feyenoord midfielder Song Chong-Gug came close with a right foot from far out. But the best chance fell to Lee Chun-Soo, South Korea's World Cup star who was causing Argentina all sorts of trouble down the left side.

Just on the half hour the speedy 21-year-old who plays for Ulsan Hyundai ran in to collect a rebound and fired in a shot that Argentina's goalkeeper Pablo Caballera did well to keep out.

Another chance fell to striker Cha Du-Ri, but a cross from Lee just floated over his head as he bore down on goal in the 43rd minute.

Argentina's Portugal-based defender Facundo Quiroga hit back after half time. He produced a moment of magic, and nearly bagged a second goal, when he turned the defence and fired and low in the 49th minute only to be denied by the alert South Korean goalkeeper Lee Woon-Jae.

Substitute Choi Tae-Uk came on in the South Korean attack for Cha Du-Ri in the 58th minute and was disappointed he didn't score with his first touch when a dipping cross found him in front of goal. He missed his shot and failed to connect.

At the other end Pablo Aimar, one of four players in the Argentina side who took part in their World Cup campaign last year that ended in an embarrassing early exit, shod just wide minutes later.

Striker Saviola nearly had a second on the hour from close range but keeper Lee snatched the

ball off his toes. An even better scoring attempt fell to South Korea's new boy Cho Jae-Jin, playing his second game for the national side, who glided a header just past the post from a Lee Chun-Soo corner with five minutes left.

South Korea's star striker Ahn Jung-Hwan, who was given a special dispensation from military service - compulsory in South Korea - so that he could join the squad for the match, was not called on to play and remained on the substitutes' bench.

TEAMS

South Korea: Lee Woon-Jae, Kim Tae-Young, Cho Byung-Kuk, Yoo Sang-Chul (capt), Lee Eul-Yong (Wang Jung-Hyun 45), Kim Nam-Il, Lee Chun-Soo, Lee Young-Pyo, Song Chong-Gug (Lee Ki-Hyung 45, Choi Sung-Yong 64), Cha Du-Ri (Choi Tae-Uk 58), Choi Jae-Jin

Argentina: Pablo Cavallero, Fabricio Coloccini, Facundo Quiroga, Diego Placente, Javier Zanetti (capt), Gabriel Heinze, Esteban Cambiasso, Pablo Aimar (Juan Roman Riquelme 77), Santiago Solari (Lucas Castroman 81), Luciano Galletti (Maximiliano Rodriguez 33), Javier Saviola (Bernardo Romeo 84)

Yellow cards: Argentina: Galletti (20), Rodriguez (82)
Referee: Rungklay Mongkol (THA)
Attendance: 62,000

Caniggia blasts McLeish

Football

AFP, Glasgow

A Former Argentine international Claudio Caniggia has accused Rangers manager Alex McLeish of wrecking his dream to play in the Champions League.

The 36-year-old striker said he was released at the end of the season after helping Rangers to the treble despite McLeish promising to get him an extension to his contract.

"Alex McLeish has deeply disappointed me as a person and as a coach. He misled me the whole season," Caniggia told the Scottish Sun.

"Alex McLeish has shown himself to be soft - like Mickey Mouse. He is as lightweight as paper."

"He informed me the Rangers board had told me I had to go. I remember very well him telling me if we won the league he should have enough power to extend my stay for one more year."

"I have done everything in my career except play in the Champions League. Alex McLeish has destroyed my last dream in football."

And Caniggia insisted that McLeish did not have what it takes to be a top coach despite his success at Ibrox.

"If Alex McLeish keeps on like this the nearest he will get to a big

club in Italy or Spain will be the airport.

"Let's face it, Rangers only won the league because Celtic were so

obsessed with winning the UEFA Cup. They arrived at the final game of the season completely shattered while we were well rested."



CLAUDIO CANIGGIA

Gazza to return to China

Football

AFP, Beijing

Former England international Paul Gascoigne has assured his Chinese club he will return despite checking into a rehab clinic in the United States for his alcohol problems, state press said Wednesday.

Gazza's manager told the Gansu Tianma that the former football maestro would be a little late in returning from his holiday, but would be back when China's B-league resumes, Xinhua news agency reported.

"Gazza's agent has contacted him on Monday after receiving the club's call. We were told that Gazza has no intention to leave the club. He is certain to come back," Zhang Tongpo, general manager of Tianma, told Xinhua.

Gascoigne also promised further talks with the club on commercial development, the manager said.

"As a world-famous star, he is unlikely to breach a contract he has signed," Zhang added.

The former international reportedly checked into a rehab clinic in southwestern United

Kirin Cup Paraguay, Japan fire blanks

REUTERS, Saitama

Japan were held to a goalless draw by Paraguay in the Kirin Cup on Wednesday as they continued to struggle before the Confederations Cup later this month.

Japan have won just once in the seven games under new coach Zico, who had warned his squad they must beat Paraguay.

Striker Yoshito Okubo did head past goalkeeper Ricardo Tavares in the 76th minute at Saitama Stadium but was ruled to have been offside.

Brazilian-born Alex, playing in an experimental left-back position for Japan, almost forged the opening in the 52nd minute, producing an exquisite turn inside the box only for his shot to flash just wide of the post.

Five minutes later, Paraguay midfielder Carlos Bonet came close with a clever chip from 25 metres after spotting goalkeeper Seigo Narazaki off his line.

The closest Japan came to scoring in a mediocre first half was when Paraguay defender Ruben Maldonado almost headed a Nobuhisa Yamada cross into his own goal in the 34th minute, but Tavares acrobatically kept the ball out.

Japan travel to France next week for the June 18-29 Confederations Cup, where they are drawn alongside the hosts, Colombia and New Zealand in Group A.

Blatter anti-expansion



REUTERS, Berlin

FIFA president Sepp Blatter will oppose a South American proposal to expand the World Cup finals from 32 to 36 teams. "I will fight to make sure that we stay with 32 teams," Blatter told Wednesday's Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) daily.

"I want to avoid internal fighting but the South Americans have to understand. In the decision between 32 and 36 teams, the credibility of the world's biggest football festival is at stake and we want to preserve that credibility. It's

as simple as that."

Brazil and Argentina are leading a South American campaign to add four teams to the next finals in 2006 in Germany to make amends for losing a place following a trade-off



SEPP BLATTER last December.

South American federation CONMEBOL has a plan under which a mini-playoff round would be introduced in the middle of the tournament.

That proposal has failed to impress Blatter, who had said before that he would rather stick to the 32-team format. German organisers of the 2006 finals agree with him.

The South Americans have until June 28, when FIFA meets in Paris on the eve of the Confederations Cup final, to persuade voters on the executive committee to endorse the 36-team format.

In the FAZ interview, Blatter also repeated that he was considering seeking a third term in charge of world soccer's governing body.

"When I said that I would stop after two terms, it looked like there were blossoming years ahead for FIFA," he said.

"But now, with the decline of the global economy, the SARS virus and the war in Iraq, everything has become more difficult. To leave now would be like refusing to face responsibilities."

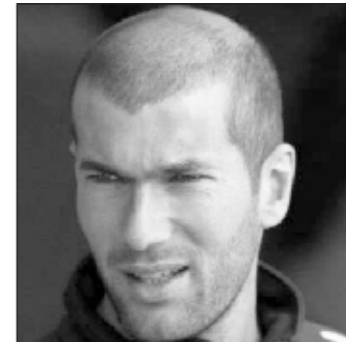
Blatter was re-elected last year for a second four-year term following a controversial election battle that resulted in several legal actions being taken.

Zidane for Algeria

Football

AFP, Madrid

Two-time World Footballer of the Year Zinedine Zidane and his club Real Madrid are to sponsor 20 Algerian children affected by last month's deadly earthquake to allow them to spend time at a summer camp. The 30-year-old French-born son of Algerian immigrants will also spend two days



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

with children at the camp which brings together 500 young people from July 16 to 30, it was announced on Tuesday.

The May 21 earthquake measured 6.8 on the Richter scale, killing 2,271 and injuring more than 10,000 according to latest government figures.

The powerful earth tremor - Algeria's worst since 1980 - left a trail of widespread destruction in Algiers and several towns to the east of the capital.

Welcome amigo!

GUARDIAN UNLIMITED, London

A cut-out-and-keep guide to some of the key phrases David Beckham might need if his transfer to Barcelona or Real Madrid goes ahead

¿Se me ve gordo el culo en este sarong?

Does my bum look big in this sarong?

¿Qué te parece si llamamos al próximo niño «Barri xines»?

Why don't we call the next child "Chinatown"?

¿Dónde puto se puede comprar Gucci en esta maldita ciudad?

Where the hell can I buy Gucci in this wretched city?

No pasa nada, el jefe me tiró una bota en la cara nada más.

It's nothing - the boss just threw a boot in my face, that's all.

Permite que le presente mi esposa, «La Pija».

Allow me to introduce my wife,

Posh.

Fue en otro momento una «Chica Picante», ¿sabe?

She used to be a Spice Girl, you know.

Claro que le suena. Las Chicas Picantes, aquellas de «zig-a-zig ah», o como sea que se dice en castellano.

Of course you've heard of them. The Spice Girls, the ones who sang "zig-a-zig ah", or however you say it in Spanish.

¿Ha escuchado su último disco? Pues yo tampoco.

Have you heard her latest record? No, neither have I.

¿Y a usted qué le pasa? ¿O es que jamás ha visto un hombre vestido de la ropa íntima de su mujer?

What's wrong with you? Haven't you ever seen a man wearing his wife's undies before?

Próxima parada, Japón.

Next stop, Japan.

