

World champs in France

Parreira's work cut out



REUTERS, Paris

World champions Brazil cancelled their first Confederations Cup training session after arriving late in Paris from Nigeria on Thursday.

"We took off around midnight and spent the night on the plane. The players were really tired and coach Carlos Alberto Parreira decided to cancel the training session," Brazil press officer Rodrigo Paiva told reporters.

"The team will have their first practice at the Camp des Loges, the Paris St Germain training centre, on Friday.

Brazil played a friendly against Nigeria on Wednesday, winning 3-0 to secure their first win since Carlos Alberto Parreira took charge in January.

After a few hours sleep at their hotel in Ville d'Avray, about 20 km west of Paris, most of the players went for a tour of Paris with PSG midfielder Ronaldinho as a guide.

The South Americans, hit by club commitments, injuries and the need to rest the likes of Ronaldo and Rivaldo, named 11 uncapped players in their squad for the tournament.

They have been drawn in Group B with the United States, Cameroon and Turkey and play their opening game against African champions Cameroon on June 19 at the Stade de France.

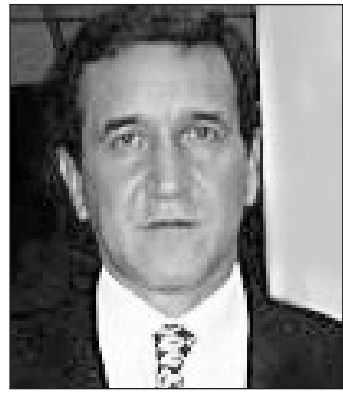
Brazil's performance at the Confederations Cup two years ago cost coach Emerson Leao his job as goalless draws against Japan and Canada were followed by a humiliating defeat to Australia in the third-place play-off.

Leao, who was forced by club

commitments to take a makeshift team to the tournament, had been assured by federation chiefs beforehand that the mitigating circumstances would be taken into account when his performance was judged.

In the event, he was unceremoniously sacked at Tokyo airport as the team waited to board the plane for the 24-hour journey back to Brazil.

Ominously, Parreira finds himself in a similarly uncomfortable position going into the Confederations Cup and has



CARLOS ALBERTO PARREIRA

already received the dreaded vote of confidence.

"I want to make it clear from the start that I'm not demanding results," said Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) president Ricardo Teixeira.

"I know that the team staff had difficulty in picking the 23 players and there was a great concern in not disrespecting the clubs."

With the Brazilian championship in full swing and Parreira has carefully selected his squad to avoid seriously depleting some of the clubs.

The coach has also decided that players such as Rivaldo, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Gilberto Silva need a rest after two years of almost non-stop football.

Furthermore, he has been unable to call on Santos trio Renato, Robinho and Diego, who are con-

sidered three of Brazil's most promising young players, as their club are still in the South American Libertadores Cup.

The result is a squad which includes 11 uncapped players, plus a few others who critics say have been picked at a moment when their club form does not merit a call-up.

Parreira, who is in his third stint in arguably soccer's hottest seat, has tried to look on the bright side, nonetheless.

"This team may lack experience but it's technically strong," he said. "We're not going just to fulfil the fixture list."

The result against Nigeria was promising as strikers Gil and Luis Fabiano both scored on their debuts to give Brazil an easy win over the Super Eagles -- even though they had completed the 20-hour journey from South America less than 48 hours earlier and had held only one practice session.

"Only Brazil can travel for 20 hours, put together a team and beat a strong team like Nigeria," said a delighted Parreira.

The Confederations Cup gives Parreira a chance to test some new players before the South American World Cup qualifiers start in September.

Parreira has said in the past that the qualifiers -- in which Brazil face hostile crowds, matches at high altitude and others played in intense heat -- are more difficult than the World Cup itself.

But, although he admits the main benefit of the Confederations Cup is the chance to experiment, he realises that Brazil still have to preserve their reputation.

"Every time we take part in something, it's important that we play well, win the title and are crowned champions," he said.

Leao, who resurrected his career by leading Santos to last year's Brazilian championship title, would be the first to agree.

There's a buzz around Paris



FIFA, Paris

As the general strike takes hold in Paris, it is revolution time all over again in the French capital.

Protestors, exasperated commuters and overflowing rubbish bins are fighting for space on the streets these days, and the industrial unrest has even usurped football as the hottest topic in the city's legendary bars and restaurants. Quite how long the strike is going to last is anyone's guess but Parisian cafe talk, at least, is about to return to more carefree concerns.

The FIFA Confederations Cup France 2003 is nearly upon us, and the beautiful game is about to play its usual salutary role, that of replacing hard reality with golden dreams. Lively debate will turn from striking to strikers, from mass demonstrations to goal celebrations, from industrial action to goalmouth action. The Bleus, who not so long ago changed the face of French football -- and French society forever, are set to take centre stage once again.

On 12 July 1998, a nation of talented individuals became a nation of winners. Forget last year's Asian humiliation, remember rather that magical night when 22 brave young men and a wily coach staged a revolution of their own, bringing delight and delirium into the lives of ordinary French people everywhere.

For the fans, the FIFA Confederations Cup France 2003 is a chance to relive glorious memories of France's finest footballing hour, and with the Turkish, Cameroonian and Brazilian fans gearing up for a party, the atmosphere strikes or no strikes should be very special over the coming weeks.

Fans, like footballers, are a superstitious lot. It will not have escaped the notice of many French supporters that a series of strikes preceded the FIFA World Cup France 1998. Industrial action that summer gave rise to fears that teams would not be able to travel around the country freely. The transport network has been badly hit this year too -- an obvious sign that the Bleus are bound to win again on home soil.

If you want to talk football in this country, prepare to reminisce about 1998. Claude Simonet, President of the French Football Federation, speaking after the draw for France 2003 gave a typical fan's eye view: "A France-Brazil final would be great, a replay of 12 July 1998."

The football festival of five years ago invariably evokes a smile, as people recall killed Scotsmen dancing with boisterous Norwegians, parties on Nantes' "Copacabana" beach in honour of the Brazilians, the pounding drums and garish painted faces of the Nigerian fans, and the mass of respectful Japanese fans who had come such a long way to watch their team play in the FIFA World Cup for the first time.

What everyone remembers most though is the incredible communion between the home fans as a dream came true before their very eyes. Never-to-be-forgotten images return of the millions of supporters taking to the Champs Elysees on "that night", that marvellous night of 12 July 1998. Chilean and Brazilian supporters sing and wave banners together before the 1998 Soccer World Cup second round match between Brazil and Chile, 27 June at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris.

Travel the length and breadth of the country, from Paris to Marseilles by way of Lyons, Toulouse and Bordeaux and ordinary people will tell you heart-warming stories of where they were and what they were doing "that night". All were in front of a screen for 90 minutes at least, of course, but each recounts his subsequent celebration as a cherished personal memory. No wonder the French fans are looking forward to France 2003 then. Any excuse to relive such joy even to a lesser degree is welcome.

For the sizeable Turkish community in France, meanwhile, the competition is a perfect opportunity to pay tribute to their own heroes. Turkey's fabulous run to the semi-final at the FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan had the fans out on the streets, and this year they will be able to cheer on their team in person.

The atmosphere in the stadium when the Turks are in town should be electric then, and the same can be said for games involving Cameroon. The African champions have yet to get over their early exit in the Far East last year, but can rely on a huge, vibrant following in France to get them back on track.

The Brazilian restaurants in Paris, meanwhile, are busy preparing giant screens and maracas for a fortnight's partying in honour of their world champions. A relatively small but vociferous bunch of New Zealanders, many of whom are based in London, are also packing their bags for their French rendezvous.

And with the French team desperate to put the ghosts of Korea/Japan 2002 behind them and to give their fans a taste of former glories, there could be even less room on the boulevards and avenues of Paris in the coming weeks. Move over demonstrators, the celebrators are taking to the streets!

Primera Liga preview

Sociedad's biggest day?



AFP, Madrid

The rest of Spain may be convulsed with Beckham-mania over the prospect of him going to either Barcelona or Real Madrid but league leaders Real Sociedad remain virtually oblivious to all the furore surrounding the possible arrival of the England captain and his pop star wife.

"The only thing I am thinking about is winning our final two games and the league. Celta have improved a lot in recent weeks and then we have our final game at Atletico Madrid, so that's not going to be any easy ride either," said Spanish international playmaker Xabi Alonso, himself the subject of much transfer speculation.

The Basques stand on top of the Spanish first division with 73 points from their 36 games and have a one point advantage over Real Madrid. Deportivo La Coruna lie third on 69 points but, barring a spectacular collapse by the leading pair, are all but mathematically out of the title race.

Real Sociedad's first task in their bid to win their first title in 21 years is to overcome Champions League candidates Celta Vigo on Sunday, in the Galicians' intimidating Balaídos stadium where they have not won in their last 13 league visits.

"Celta are in their own castle but the fact that this squad has never had the league trophy in our hands -- in fact most of us have never had a trophy of any sort in our hands -- makes us even more determined not to falter now," added Xabi Alonso.

Aiding Sociedad is the fact that Celta have key defenders Fernando Caceres and Juanfran Garcia both suspended.

Madrid know that they cannot win the championship in their derby

match at Atletico Madrid on Sunday but they could lose it at the home of their local rivals.

If Sociedad do manage to reverse recent history and win at Celta, then Real must do the same at Atletico to ensure they remain in contention for the championship on the final weekend of the season.

Under Spanish league rules, if teams are equal on points at the end of the season then they are separated initially according to the results between the teams in ques-

Contra's likely replacement is Jorge Otero but the former Spanish international is now 34 and this week announced that he was going to hang up his boots at the end of the season.

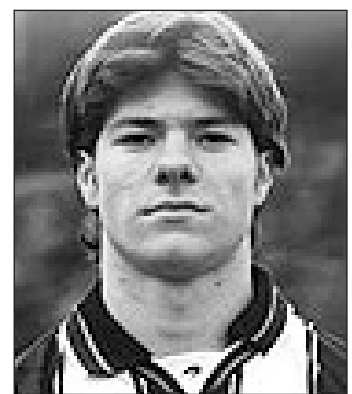
The focus of attention at Barcelona this week has been on Sunday's presidential election and the declarations of Joan Laporta that he can bring David Beckham to the Nou Camp if he becomes the Catalan club's chosen one.

However, if they are to rescue anything from this season on the field and keep alive their own slim chances of qualifying for the UEFA Cup then Barca must also get a good result at Valencia on Sunday.

"I'm not interested in talking about David Beckham. Our future lies in what happens in (against Valencia) in the Mestalla," said Barcelona midfielder Luis Enrique Martinez on Wednesday.

"As a player, I can't vote so the only thing I'm worried about is whether I'm in the team on Sunday," added the former Spanish international.

Barca coach Radomir Antic has the rare luxury of a full squad at his disposal but Valencia -- who will still be the reigning champions when they kick off although they may not be by the time the whistle is blown -- will be without their suspended Argentine defender Roberto Ayala.



XABI ALONSO

tion, and Real Sociedad have the advantage in head-to-head encounters with Ronaldo, Raul and the rest of Real Madrid.

Atletico will also be unwilling to be generous to their neighbours as a place in next season's UEFA Cup is still up for grabs.

"Everything is still to play for so, we are not going to help them out. And we can win. Madrid are a good team but they have not looked quite like superstars recently," commented Atletico midfielder Emerson this week.

Real Madrid might find it profitable to put extra resources down their left wing as the Romanian defender Cosmin Contra is suspended and Atletico could miss his pace at right back.

FIXTURES:	
Saturday (kick off GMT):	Valladolid v Rayo Vallecano (1700)
Sunday:	Osasuna v Alaves (1700), Athletic Bilbao v Deportivo La Coruna (1900), Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid (1900), Real Betis v Racing Santander (1900), Celta Vigo v Real Sociedad (1900), Espanyol v Villarreal (1900), Malaga v Sevilla (1900), Recreativo Huelva v Real Mallorca (1900), Valencia v Barcelona (1900)

Veron leaving too?



AFP, London

Argentina midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron could be following David Beckham out the exit door at Old Trafford, according to press reports in England and Italy.

Juventus contacted Manchester United with an inquiry about Veron's availability in April and, according to Italian reports, have prepared a 20-million-euro bid for the midfielder.

The Turin giants could also attempt to tempt United into a sale by offering either Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids or French defender Lilian Thuram as part of a swap deal.

United manager Alex Ferguson is a long-standing admirer of both players and Juve have reason to sell. Davids will be a free agent next summer and able to leave for nothing while Thuram has reportedly fallen out with Juventus coach Marcello Lippi.

Pini Zihavi, an agent who was involved in United's 28-million pound signing of Veron from Lazio in 2001, confirmed Juventus's interest.

"They have been interested in him a long time," he told The Guardian.

"His name was brought up (in talks between the clubs) towards the end of the season."

It remains to be seen if Ferguson will be prepared to offload Veron and effectively admit that he overpaid for a player who has, in the eyes of most United fans, been a huge disappointment in his two seasons at Old Trafford.

His presence in the United midfield was seen as a key reason for the club's trophy-less 2001-02 season.

After a promising start in his second season, particularly in Europe, Veron found himself sidelined by injury as United overhauled Arsenal to reclaim their English Premiership title.

Bracing for Becks

AFP, Hanoi

David Beckham, already a superstar in football-mad Asia, will have a further opportunity to cement his iconic status later this month on a whistle-stop promotional tour through the region.

The England skipper will put his skills on display, albeit from the sidelines, at a series of football festivals in Tokyo on June 21, Kuala Lumpur on June 24 and in Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok the following day.

"I had such a good time in Asia last summer at the World Cup and have been looking forward to returning. With such great fans all across Asia I'm sure it's going to be a memorable trip," Beckham said.

Castrol, which is sponsoring the tour, has declined to reveal how much the 28-year-old -- reputed to be the highest paid player in Europe -- will receive for the jaunt.

The Manchester United midfielder is at the centre of feverish speculation over whom he will be playing for next season, with Spanish clubs Real Madrid and Barcelona heading the list of those eager to tap his talent.

Liverpool due in Asia in July



AFP, Hong Kong

English Premier League giants Liverpool confirmed Friday they will play a friendly match in Hong Kong in July as part of their buildup to the 2003-2004 season.

The Worthington Cup holders will face the Hong Kong national side on July 27 at Hong Kong stadium as part of their Asia tour, the club said in a statement.

"The whole team is really looking forward to playing in Hong Kong. After all the problems with SARS, we are delighted to be able to give our fans in Hong Kong something truly spectacular to look forward to," Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier said.

There had been concerns the match would have to be cancelled due to the outbreak of Severe Acute

Respiratory Syndrome in Hong Kong which has killed 293 people and caused the cancellation of many events in the city. However, the decision by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to drop its warning against travel to the territory last month amid signs the outbreak was under control, swayed the Merseyside club's final decision.

Hong Kong Football Association president Timothy Fok, welcomed the decision.

"Confirmation of the match will do a great deal towards helping put Hong Kong back on the map of international sports," he said.

However, there was disappointment for mainland Chinese fans with Liverpool opting to cancel a scheduled match in the eastern city of Shanghai because of continuing fears over SARS.

Liverpool will instead take on Thailand's national team in Bangkok on July 24 before flying to Hong Kong.

Stockport target Gazza



AFP, Stockport

Paul Gascoigne, still under contract with Chinese second division side Gansu Tianma, is the target of Stockport County, the Stockport Express reported on Thursday.

The 36-year-old former international however has reportedly been recovering in a rehab clinic in the southwestern United States after an alcoholic binge while playing for Tianma.

"I would have no worries signing Gazza and I know he wouldn't let anyone down," Stockport manager Carlton Palmer said. "He has a great presence and would murder the Second Division."

"Having him at the club would also have a positive effect on the other players. Paul still has a tremendous ability and I wouldn't have any problems getting him fit," he added.

"There is no doubt he would raise the profile of Stockport County and he would be great for the club, but there is still a long way to go."

So far so good?



AFP, Lisbon

With exactly one year to go until the kick-off of the Euro 2004 football championship, host nation Portugal on Thursday downplayed press reports of cost overshoots and stadium construction delays and said it would be ready to host the tournament.

"At this moment there is nothing to indicate that everything will not be ready on time," secretary of state for sport, Herminio Loureiro, told state radio Antenna 1.

Earlier daily newspaper Publico quoted an official as saying two stadiums being built for the tournament would not be ready by the end of September as required by European football governing body UEFA.

Laurentino Dias, the head of a parliamentary committee overseeing the Euro 2004 project, told the paper FC Porto's new stadium in second city Oporto and a venue being built on top of a mountain in

the outskirts of the northern city of Braga would likely miss the deadline "given their complexity".

He added he was also concerned over the state of access roads to the stadium in Oporto and in two other locations.

Portugal, which has never hosted a major sports event before, is building seven new stadiums and renovating three others to host the European championships from June 12 to July 4 next year.

The stadiums are expected to cost 640 million euros (752 million dollars) when features such as commercial areas and clinics are included, with the cost rising to 800 million euros (941 million dollars) when the cost of amenities and road access are added.

UEFA requires all stadiums which will be used during the competition to be ready by September 30 so they can be tried out over next season's Portuguese championship.

It is the first time that a country is building new stadiums in order to host the finals, which are considered to be the largest sporting event after the Olympics and the World Cup.

But Gilberto Madail, the chairman of the Portuguese Football

Federation, said he was confident all stadiums would be ready by the deadline set by UEFA.

"That does not mean they will all be exactly ready to host matches on September 30, there could be problems with grass on the pitch or a few amenities, but they will be functional by then," he said.

Daily newspaper Diario de Noticias meanwhile reported Thursday that nine of the 10 stadiums are over budget.

The paper said an independent audit requested by tournament organizers, which was prepared in April, concluded that the construction cost of the stadiums was 127 million euros (149 million dollars) over budget, 23 percent more than initially expected. Loureiro said the extra costs are primarily related to new features which city halls or football clubs decided to add to the stadium projects once construction work got underway.

"The costs in question are the responsibility of the stadium owners who wanted to use the Euro 2004 to improve their facilities," he said.

Ticket sales for the 31 matches of the finals, the largest sporting event ever to be held in Portugal, began in April.