

Barcelona race too close to call

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

The immediate future of a dozen top players, including England captain David Beckham, will become clearer on Sunday when up to 95,000 members of Football Club Barcelona vote to elect a new president.

Six men are running for the top job at one of the world's largest and most successful sporting clubs, with Joan Laporta and Lluís Bassat neck and neck at the front of the pack, according to local newspaper polls.

Support for Laporta has surged since Manchester United announced that they would be willing to accept his bid for Beckham -- subject to him winning the election and agreeing personal terms with the famous midfielder.

He is a percentage point ahead of Bassat in the latest poll in Barcelona daily Sport but with over 20 per cent of the voters still undecided there is still plenty of scope for a surprise.

Laporta has another deal agreed to bring in Turkish international goalkeeper Rustu Recber, and is promising five major signings should he win the vote.

"Barcelona need a player like Beckham to return to the front rank

of world football," says Laporta, a 40-year-old lawyer. "The signing would pay for itself."

Bassat, by contrast, has refused to give any hints about the players he is planning to bring in.

Instead, the 61-year-old publicist has recruited Pep Guardiola as his sporting director and has begun talks to sign Ronald Koeman from Ajax Amsterdam as coach.

"My task is not simply to sign stars," Guardiola said. "I've spoken to a lot of the players other candidates are talking about but I want to see whether they're interested in coming for the money or if they have a commitment to the cause."

It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep track of the players being promised by the other candidates.

Jaume Llauroado has produced the most crowd-pleasers, announcing a deal to sign Romanian defender Cristian Chivu from Ajax early in the campaign and following that up with a promise to bring in Christian Vieri from Inter Milan.

He went even further on Thursday, producing a sealed envelope in which he says is a contract to sign a Real Madrid first-team player, possibly young striker Javier Portillo.

"It's a Florentino-style signing," Llauroado said in reference to Florentino Perez's deal to sign Luis Figo from Barcelona, a coup that

handed him victory in the Real Madrid presidential election three years ago.

Jordi Majo has a deal to sign Mateja Kezman, whose 35 goals for PSV Eindhoven made him the highest scorer in any major European league last season.

Josep Maria Minguella has also been busy, announcing an agreement with Deportivo Coruna's Roy Makaay, Spain's leading goalscorer this season and one of the hottest properties around.

Minguella says he has six named players waiting to join, plus two goalkeepers should the coach decide they are needed.

Only Josep Martinez-Roviro has stopped short of making any firm promises, saying only that he will attempt to sign Ruud van Nistelrooy from Manchester United if he wins the vote.

Van Nistelrooy, Makaay, Kezman and Vieri are among the best in the world and any of them would walk into the Barcelona team.

The election has been dominated by one name alone, though, and even if Beckham is unlikely to choose Barcelona over Real Madrid or AC Milan his association with the Laporta campaign may be enough to see the youngest of the six candidates to victory.

The result is expected around 2100 GMT on Sunday.

Guti to consider his future

REUTERS, Barcelona

Spanish international Guti will consider leaving Real Madrid if David Beckham joins the club and a move to England would be his preferred option.

"I'm at a point in my life where I need to play," Guti told TeleMadrid radio. "If Beckham came I'd have to be realistic and think that there wouldn't be many chances for me."

Manchester United have already signalled their willingness to sell Beckham to Barcelona if Joan Laporta wins Sunday's presidential election and can then persuade the England captain to come.

Real Madrid are widely expected to enter the bidding as soon as the Spanish league title is won or lost and a move to the nine-times European champions could be more attractive to Beckham.

Guti is a Spanish international regular but he has a hard enough time getting into the Real Madrid first team as it is and he recognised that the arrival of Beckham would make him look towards the Premier League.

"I've always thought that if I left Spain I'd like to play in England," he said. "Playing there for a few years would be a good option."

Beckham is due back in England from the U.S. later on Saturday before heading out to Asia next week on another promotional tour.



Brazilian players practice at the Camp des Loges camp near Paris yesterday ahead of the Confederation Cup.

PHOTO: AFP

Cruyff backs Becks bid

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Joan Laporta is facing fierce criticism from rival candidates over his bid to sign David Beckham but former Barcelona player and coach Johan Cruyff has given his support to the proposed transfer.

"It's a good move," Cruyff said in a radio interview with Cadena Cope in Spain. "In terms of promotion, Beckham sells more than any other player in the world. There is no doubt about his quality and he could put Barcelona back where they want to be."

While Cruyff was advising Barcelona to move for Beckham, Bobby Robson, the man who replaced the Dutchman as coach at the club, was recommending Barca to the England player.

"I know David's situation is not clear-cut and I wouldn't want to influence him either way, but what I can say is that Barcelona is a fabulous club and a fabulous place and he would be an icon there," Robson told the Manchester United website.

"It's a great city, and the club is

that Beckham would be more likely to accept.

Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, two of Real's Brazilian players, have both said in the last few days that they would expect Beckham to choose their club over Barcelona.

Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas appeared slightly less enthusiastic on Friday, but said he would not be surprised if Beckham became the latest big signing at the club, following Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo.

Confeds Cup criticised

AFP, Paris

The Confederations Cup is hopefully a thick-skinned individual for it not it is likely to be feeling a little sore after all the insults hurled at it over the past year.

France's World Cup winning captain Didier Deschamps has attacked the competition which starts in France on Wednesday as an "aberration" on an already creaking fixture list.

Europe's key clubs have all dismissed it as "superfluous".

Deschamps' main gripe is that the Confederations Cup places an unnecessary extra burden on players' fitness.

The Monaco coach said: "This Confederations Cup is an aberration. It's an event which attacks the physical integrity of players, they won't have time to recover."

"We (the French league) start on August 2, France get together on June 11, and we finish the season on May 24: that doesn't leave a lot of time to recuperate."

Deschamps' comments mirror the opinion from the G14 group of Europe's top teams.

G14 director general Thomas Kurth explained: "We're opposed to this competition. We've tried to be conciliatory, constructive, to find a solution. Otherwise we'll have to scale down competitions across the board."

He added: "Clubs are lending their players, but they don't get anything in return."

France seek fresh start



AFP, Paris

The 2003 Confederations Cup represents the first real test for hosts France to prove to the world that they have recovered from their pitiful showing at last year's World Cup.

A first round exit in Asia without a single goal scored was nothing short of a humiliating disaster for the 1998 champions, resulting in a considered clear out of the old guard by new coach Jacques Santini on the return home.

Under Santini's guidance France has put together a string of decent results in their qualifying group for Euro 2004 yet admittedly against low key opponents.

Coming up against the likes of World Cup winners Brazil, Turkey and the United States will be a different ball game altogether, a task made even more difficult without their midfield general Zinedine Zidane.

Santini, speaking from France's base camp at Clairefontaine, said: "With 'Zizou' missing it'll give others

the chance of a game - it's up to them to seize the opportunity."

"This Cup is being held between two stages of qualification (for Euro 2004), but it's an important objective for 'Les Bleus'," added the former Lyon coach.

"Because of the overloaded fixture list there are no more tournaments - as a result it's going to be useful for us."

France, who beat South Korea in the 2001 final, are drawn in Group A against Japan, Colombia and outsiders New Zealand.

Group B is headed by a Brazil squad virtually unrecognisable from the one that triumphed over Germany in the World Cup last year.

For coach Carlos Alberto Parreira it represents a chance to unleash some fresh talent on to the international stage as he makes do without World Footballer of the Year Ronaldo, who like teammate Roberto Carlos is being held on to by his club Real Madrid.

AC Milan midfielder Rivaldo is also an absentee, leaving Parreira to call up players based in Brazil.

One star name he can rely on is Ronaldinho who will surely be as busy off the pitch as on as the Paris Saint Germain striker seeks to find a new home for next season.

Brazil has as company in Group B Turkey, whom they beat in the World Cup semi-finals, Cameroon, and the United States, one of the surprise packages in Asia making it through to the quarter-finals.

US coach Bruce Arena believes his team's World Cup showing has left an important legacy.

"For sure we've grown in confidence, we've got a more positive approach," he said.

"We're confident in our capacity to get a good result up against any team," added the coach who has called up ten of his World Cup team including Landon Donovan and Earnie Stewart.

"We have selected a group of players that combines experience and youth," said Arena.

"For many of these players, it will be their first experience in a competition of this calibre, so the games can only benefit our group as we progress towards World Cup qualifying in 2004."

Japan's Brazilian coach Zico has had to contend with a wave of setbacks as he attempts to develop his team towards the 2006 World Cup.

Zico, who took over from Philippe Troussier last July, has seen four friendlies called off because of either SARS or the war in Iraq.

The Brazilian legend's problems were compounded with the defection through injury of Feyenoord midfielder Shinji Ono and Masashi Nakayama but he is hoping his new secret weapon will cause trouble - Brazilian-born star Alex Santos who plays at left wing-back.

Zico's record since taking over reads one win against South Korea, two defeats and two draws.

Japan Football Association president Saburo Kawabuchi said:

"For Japan, the Confederations Cup is a process of finding ideal tactics. We don't set any quotas for Zico. His quota is to qualify for the 2006 World Cup in Germany."

For Cameroon, the event, which is being staged at the Stade de France in Paris, Lyon and St Etienne delivers up a chance to shrug off a poor World Cup campaign while New Zealand will be hoping to improve on their last appearance in the competition in 1999 when they lost all their three matches.

South American champions Colombia are France's first opposition in Lyon on Wednesday.

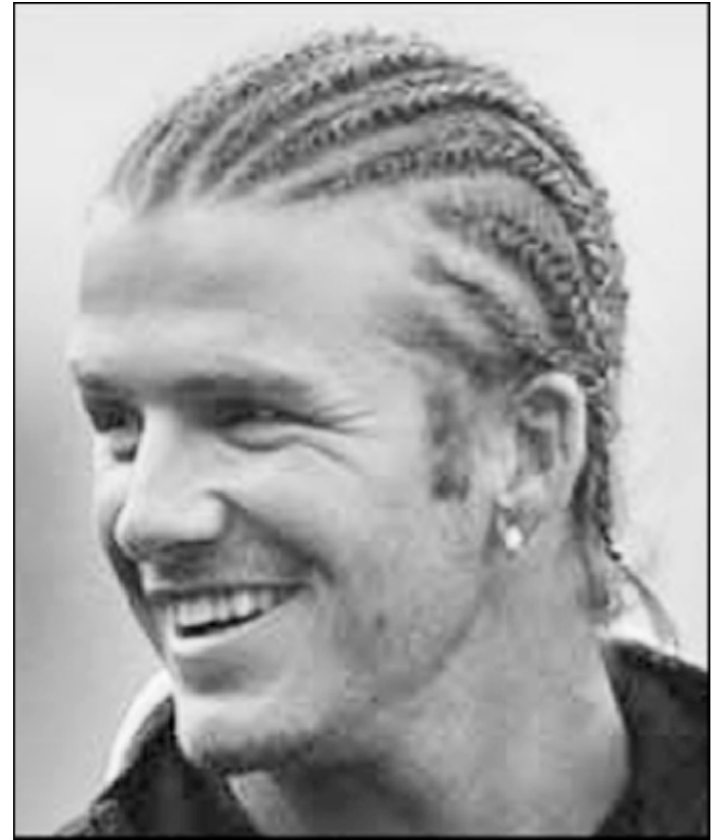
Italian Supercup in New York

AFP, Rome

The Italian Supercup, which pits the country's league champions against the cup winners, will take place in New York this summer, the Gazzetta dello Sport reported Saturday.

Juventus, who successfully defended their Serie A title this season, will take on cup victors AC Milan at the Giants Stadium on August 3 in a repeat of this year's Champions League final.

The decision to host the match in the United States was made because both Juventus and European champions AC Milan will be in the country for pre-season summer tours.



DAVID BECKHAM

part of that wonderful spectrum. It's the best. There was always tension and if you can't handle that it'll eat you up, but that wouldn't bother Beckham."

Despite Laporta's deal with United, Spanish and English newspapers are convinced Real Madrid will come up with a counter-offer

"Beckham may be more market-ing than player but he's a great footballer," Casillas said.

"It would be strange to see him because there are already great footballers here and it's hard to find a space in the team, although people thought the others wouldn't come but they did."

Juve deny Veron link

Football

SOCCERNET, London

Italian champions Juventus have denied that they are about to make a 14million pound summer swoop for Manchester United's Juan Sebastian Veron.

The Italian media suggested that the former Lazio midfielder was the Bianconeri's main transfer target as they prepared to defend the Scudetto next season.

But Juve director Luciano Moggi has rubbished the reports. "Veron is not one of our objectives - we have no interest in him."

Juventus were reported to have prepared a cash offer or a part exchange deal - offering either Edgar Davids, whose contract expires next year, or defender Lilian Thuram, who has a frosty relationship with manager Marcello Lippi, to tempt United.

Ferguson is known to be keen admirer of both players but the one he covets most, Czech forward Pavel Nedved, has committing his future to the Italian club insisting he wants to end his career at the Delle Alpi.

If a deal was in the offing United would be unlikely to agree to a cash only transfer that comprises only half of the 28 million pound they paid to bring Veron to Old Trafford two-years ago.

It also seems unlikely that United boss Sir Alex Ferguson would sell one of his star European performers as he mounts a challenge for the UEFA Champions League but Pini Zihavi, the agent responsible for Veron's move to United, insists Juve are interested in the Argentinian international.

"They have been interested in

him a long time," Zihavi said. "His name was brought up towards the end of the season."

Veron still has three-years left on

his contract and any potential deal would be affected by David Beckham's proposed move to Barcelona or Real Madrid.



JUAN SEBASTIAN VERON

Del Bosque doomed?

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque is convinced his days are numbered with the Spanish giants.

Del Bosque said he believes his final combat will be the race for the 2002-2003 Spanish title in which Real are just a point behind leaders Real Sociedad.

"We all have feelings and I'm convinced that I'm not going to continue, that it will be very difficult to go on," Del Bosque told Spanish radio.

"I want to continue with Real Madrid but if at this point in the season no decision has been taken I think we can all draw our own conclusions."

Real Madrid have decided that Del Bosque and captain Fernando Hierro will have to wait until the end of the season before opening negotiations for new contracts.

Del Bosque has twice landed the Champions League and La Liga once since taking over from John Toshack three years ago.

Real have said they are interested in Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger as a possible replacement to Del Bosque who was blamed for

his tactics and team selection in the Champions League semi-final defeat to Juventus.

Wenger insisted last month he was staying with Arsenal

Del Bosque, who has spent over 30 years with the club as a player and coach, defended his record.

"Me, I never acted like Alex

Milan may switch to Nakata

AFP, Rome

European champions AC Milan, who earlier this week pulled out of the race to sign Manchester United's David Beckham, could turn their attention to Parma's attacking Japanese midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata, according to Saturday's Gazzetta dello Sport.

Nakata would be more suited to Milan's budget as he is believed to be available for around 15 million euros, a third of Beckham's estimated value.

The Gazzetta reported that a meeting has taken place between Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani and his Parma counterpart Stefano Tanzi to discuss the possibility of bringing Nakata to the San Siro.

Japan international Nakata is also believed to be a target for several European clubs with English Premiership Chelsea said to be leading the chase.

The 26-year-old first arrived in Italy in July 1998 to join Umbrian club Perugia where he scored 12 goals in 48 matches.



VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

Ferguson, I never left a David Beckham on the bench during a (crucial) Champions League game," he added.

Real are reported to have been in touch with Beckham's advisors over signing him.