

Beckham opens up

Football

REUTERS/AFP, Tokyo

David Beckham apologised to his new Real Madrid teammates for creating a media frenzy in the Spanish title run-in and said he had been promised his switch from Manchester United would not affect his England career.

"To join a massive club like Real Madrid is a dream," the England captain told reporters on Thursday. "I'm very excited to become part of Real Madrid. It's a very exciting experience and it's going to be a very good challenge for me, on the football field and off it."

"I want to apologise to the (Real) players because all this is not caused by me. I don't want to distract them ... they're fighting to win the league and I didn't want to upset that."

Beckham agreed to join Real from Manchester United on Tuesday in a deal worth up to 35 million euros (US\$41 million). Beckham said he would have had second thoughts if his move had put his England place at risk.

"I wouldn't have done it if it would have affected my England career," said the 28-year-old, on a promotional tour in Japan with pop-star wife Victoria.

"I have spoken to Mr (England manager Sven-Goran) Eriksson about it all because I think he's an important part of my career and ... he just said to me 'Whatever you do, it doesn't matter what club you play for, it doesn't affect you being England captain.'"

Beckham declined openly to criticise Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson after the English champion announced last week it had agreed a conditional deal to sell the midfielder to Barcelona.

"Of course it could have been done differently but I don't want to talk about that now," he shrugged.

"Real said they wanted me and it is a chance to play with a great club, so I'm looking forward to it. I'm very excited to become part of Real Madrid."

Beckham insisted he did not care that he could not wear his trademark number seven shirt at his new club. Spain striker Raul currently wears that number.

"I don't even think of taking that off Raul. For me, he is the king of Real Madrid," said Beckham.

"Whatever number they give me I will be happy. I have not even discussed with Real Madrid where they want me to play ... but it is going to be a good challenge for me, on the field and off it."

Beckham and his wife arrived in Japan amid a swirl of publicity Wednesday for the start of an Asian promotional tour. They were welcomed in Tokyo by hundreds of screaming fans.

It was his first trip to the country since last year's World Cup.

"It's amazing to be back in Japan," Beckham said. "Arriving at the airport was something special, something we've never seen as a couple."

Earlier, while making an appearance as part of a televised promo-

tional event for a Japanese beauty salon chain, Beckham said he and his family were looking forward to a new life in Spain, despite some difficulties experienced previously by English football players in adapting to life in Latin countries.

"I think it will be an exciting thing for my wife and my two sons to be living in Spain. So we are looking forward to that," he said.

Foreign media have been barred from attending any of Beckham's appearances organised by his sponsors during his three-day visit.



PHOTO: AP

English icon David Beckham laughs after being presented with a Real Madrid replica shirt with No. 11 and his name on the back by Jose Mela (R), a reporter of Spanish newspaper Diarzo As at a news conference in Tokyo yesterday.

from attending any of Beckham's appearances organised by his sponsors during his three-day visit.

English players have been notoriously poor at adapting to life in Latin countries, though Beckham will be able to look for guidance to former England international Steve McManaman, who may not play regularly for Real but has settled in well to the Spanish way of life.

Sitting beside the footballer and occasionally reaching over to clasp his hand, Beckham's wife Victoria, who still enjoys celebrity status in Japan in her own right as Posh Spice from the Spice Girls, endorsed Beckham's decision to join Real.

"I am excited about our future in Spain. I think it's going to be lovely for our children," Victoria said.

"Obviously, everybody in Manchester United has been fantastic and helped David to where he is now," she said. "So we will be missing all our friends and Manchester itself."

The Beckhams' arrived in Japan Wednesday for a three-day stay mainly to promote the goods of the footballer's main Japanese spon-

sors, including beauty product and clinic operator TBC and confectioner Meiji Seika Kaisha.

When asked what he thought about Japanese football players, Beckham said he "admired" fellow midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata of Italian side Parma.

"(Nakata) has done very well in the World Cup and ... in Europe. I swapped shirts with him in a pre-season friendly and said hello to

FRANCE V JAPAN Fancying an upset



AFP, Saint Etienne

Japan approach Friday's Confederations Cup clash against hosts France here brimming with confidence after playing New Zealand off the pitch in their Group A opener.

Coach Zico intends to leave the side that routed the tournament minnows 3-0 on Wednesday largely unchanged, adopting the maxim that if it ain't broke don't fix it.

Italian Serie A stars Hidetoshi Nakata and Shunsuke Nakamura were responsible for the goals at the Stade de France against a New Zealand side that were outclassed in every department.

This duo apart, Zico was also impressed with 21-year-old striker Yoshito Okubo, who only got the call-up following the defection due to injury of Masashi Nakayama.

"That was a good start, but the key is the next match against France," noted Saburo Kawabuchi, president of the Japanese Football Association.

The game affords Japan the chance to avenge their 1-0 defeat by France in the 2001 Confederations Cup final in Yokohama. In all, the two nations have met four times, with the score standing at three wins to France with one draw.

But as Zico suggested: "The World Cup showed us there are no favourites when it comes to a competition like this."

"Football is all about winning, and this Confederations Cup gives us an opportunity to win our first proper title."

He added: "We dominated the match against New Zealand - the quality of our midfield play was high, and we could have scored another one or two goals."

Friday's encounter will likely decide which of the two sides tops

Group A and consequently avoids a forecast match-up against the World Cup champions Brazil in Thursday's semi-finals.

While Wednesday's win was only the second since the 50-year-old Zico took over, it suggested that at the very least Japan will pose as many problems to France as did Colombia, who went close to upsetting the titleholders in their opening game.

A dubious first half penalty converted by Thierry Henry was all that separated the two sides in Lyon on Wednesday night.

French coach Jacques Santini, who is having to make do without a cluster of stars including Zinedine Zidane, said: "I want to go right to the end we're going to have to improve quite a few things."

For the most part the European champions failed to impress, with notably Bixente Lizarazu and Djibril Cisse underperforming.

Santini reflected: "The team wasn't at 100 percent for the entire 90 minutes which meant we would pay the price."

"But the pleasing thing was to see the overall progress made by the younger players."

Henry acknowledged the performance could have been better. "We weren't outstanding, but we knew how to do enough," said the Arsenal attacker.

COLOMBIA v NEW ZEALAND

sees Colombia take on New Zealand in Lyon.

New Zealand coach Mike Waitt reflected: "The Colombians play the ball slower than Japan, but they also have some very skilled players."

"We've got to lift our game for this second match. I was very disappointed with the result against Japan, especially the way we played in the first half - we had no belief."

However he did single out for praise one of the backs, Ryan Nelsen.

"Ryan showed himself capable of competing at this level," said the former Norths County and Lincoln City forward.

Japan's confident start



AFP, Paris

The 2003 Confederations Cup got underway at a half empty Stade de France here Wednesday with Japan routing outsiders New Zealand 3-0.

The opening goals in this FIFA-organised tournament, which has attracted criticism for placing extra pressure on an overladen fixture list, came with a double strike from Shunsuke Nakamura and a fine solo effort from Japan skipper Hidetoshi Nakata.

For Japan's coach, Brazilian legend Zico, the win will have helped exorcise the ghosts of his last visit to the home of French football in 1998 when as assistant coach he sat and watched Brazil humbled by France in a one-sided World Cup final.

Five years on it was his Japan side that were always in the driving seat, the 2001 Confederations Cup beaten finalists edging ahead in the 12th minute.

With their forward line bearing down on the New Zealand goal like a ship in full sail a cross from the right raced out of reach of the charging Nakata but fell at the feet of Nakamura whose angled shot from the left post slipped past keeper Mike Utting.

Shortly after Nakamura was left wondering what might have been after failing to capitalise on a deft pass from Naohiro Takahara he picked up in front of goal.

Then Yoshito Okubo, who owed his place in the starting line-up to the absence through injury of Masashi Nakayama, had the Japanese fans' pulses racing with a fiery effort that went just wide of the left-hand post.

New Zealand, lumbered with the minnows tag in the eight-team tournament, will have considered themselves fortunate not to have gone into the break further behind such was Japan's superiority.

Japan did not let up in the second half, with Nakata doubling their advantage in the 64th minute, the goal the fruit of a great run from the Parma star who outfoxed the lax New Zealand defence to shoot from outside the area, the ball flying past the outstretched Utting.

With Japan coasting Nakamura piled on the misery for New Zealand, the Reggina player's header off a cross from Nobuhisa Yamada with quarter of an hour remaining giving Utting no chance at all.

This was only Zico's second win since taking over the team that reached the second round of the World Cup last year from Philippe Troussier, and it could not have been more emphatic.

Libertadores Cup Santos' wait over

Football

REUTERS, Medellin

Brazilian champions Santos, the club made famous by Pele in the 1960s, beat Colombia's Medellin in a five-goal thriller on Wednesday to reach the Libertadores Cup final for the first time in 40 years.

Defender Alex, substitute

Fabiano and left-back Leo scored as Santos came from behind to win their semifinal second leg 3-2 and complete a 4-2 aggregate victory.

Santos, who won the trophy in 1962 and 1963, also ended the possibility of an all-Colombian final in South America's equivalent of the European Champions League.

Colombia's America and Boca Juniors of Argentina meet in the other semi-final on Thursday, with Boca leading 2-0 from the first leg in

Buenos Aires. Santos endured a long spell of mediocrity after Pele left in 1973. They bounced back last year with a young team coached by former Brazil goalkeeper Emerson Leao, winning the Brazilian championship to claim their first domestic title since 1984.

Medellin, whose archrivals Atletico Nacional are the only Colombian team to have won the Libertadores, made a good start when Tressor Moreno broke clear of the defence and flicked the ball over goalkeeper Fabio Costa to score after 13 minutes.

The Colombians took control but Costa saved two long-range shots in quick succession to keep Santos in the game.

The visitors, who had the competition's top scorer Ricardo Oliveira back in the side after a knee injury, equalized out of the blue in the 36th minute when a free kick from the right hit central defender Alex on the head and flew into the net.

Robinho of Santos and Medellin's Mauricio Molina both hit the crossbar in a dramatic opening to the second half.

In the 52nd minute, Fabiano drove in an angled shot to put Santos 2-1 ahead. The substitute, who made way for Oliveira in the starting lineup, had come on for the injured Elano in the 23rd minute.

The talented Molina, a constant headache for the Santos defence, equalized in the 81st minute.

The Colombians, needing another goal to send the tie to penalties, attacked but were tugged on the break by Leo, who scored the winner in the 87th minute from a rebound after David Gonzalez had saved his first shot.



PHOTO: AFP

Santos' forward Fabiano (21) points to the heavens after scoring the second goal against Independiente Medellin in Medellin on June 18.

Focus firmly on Ronaldinho

AFP, Paris

Real Madrid, not satisfied with their 35 million euro capture of England captain David Beckham, might be chasing Manchester United target Ronaldinho.

Real president Florentino Perez phoned Paris St Germain president Francis Graillie this week to ask about the Brazil World Cup winner, the L'Equipe sports daily reported Thursday.

Ronaldinho's agent and brother Roberto Assis said last week Manchester United, Real Madrid, Barcelona, AC Milan and Inter were interested in the player.

Manchester want Ronaldinho to play alongside Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy. Despite speculation about the 23-year-old striker's future, his coach at PSG Vahid Halilhodzic insists he does not want him to leave.

Assis claims Ronaldinho has a gentleman's agreement with the previous club to leave the club before his contract expires in 2006.

And Halilhodzic needs the 15 million dollars he can make on a Ronaldinho sale to bolster the team in other departments.

Bertrand Meheut, the president of the advisory board of main shareholder Canal Plus television, has ordered Graillie to cut the budget next season by around a third from 78 million euros to 50 million.

PSG are currently barred from buying players while the French league financial watchdog investigates their books.

Bogey Bolton first up for MU

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United will kick off the defence of their English Premiership title against local rivals Bolton who have won on their last two visits to Old Trafford.

Arsenal also face a tough start to their campaign with Everton the visitors to Highbury.

Bolton only survived in the top flight by beating Middlesbrough on the final day of the season and, ultimately, would have been relegated but for the Kevin Nolan goal which earned them a 1-0 win at Old Trafford on September 11.

The league opener will be United's first competitive match since they sold England captain David Beckham to Real Madrid and Reds fans will expect to see at least one new star lining up in his place.

Other highlights of the opening day's fixtures include Newcastle's visit to Leeds, which could see Jonathan Woodgate play for the first time at Elland Road since he left the Yorkshire club for the Magpies in January.

Liverpool have the chance to reap immediate revenge on Chelsea for the 2-1 defeat on the last day of the season which meant the Blues progressed into the

Champions League at their expense.

The two sides meet at Anfield in their opening fixture.

Division One champions Portsmouth have been handed a home start against Aston Villa, while Leicester's Walkers Stadium will see Southampton visit.

Wolves, the third promoted team, go to Ewood Park to face Blackburn.

Other fixtures on the opening day see Birmingham host Tottenham, Manchester City go to Charlton and Fulham at home to Middlesbrough.

The first big game of the season sees Manchester United head to St James' Park on the second weekend, where they roasted Newcastle 6-2 last April.

Arsenal head to Old Trafford, where they lost 2-0 last December, on September 20 with the return fixture set for March 27 next year.

The first Merseyside derby of the season is on August 30 at Everton's Goodison Park with the return match at Anfield on January 31.

Liverpool will host Man Utd on November 1 and travel to Old Trafford on April 24.

The first Manchester derby will be at Old Trafford on December 13 with Manchester City's new City of Manchester stadium playing host to its first clash on March 13.

Guti sees no Real light

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Frustrated Real Madrid midfielder Guti believes the signing of David Beckham will leave him with no option but to leave the club.

"It won't make me happy to leave my lifelong team but I don't think there's any alternative," Guti said in an interview with El Mundo on Thursday.

"I'm tired of banging into walls all the time."

Guti, who offered his first hint that he could leave Real in a radio interview over the weekend, missed

"The doors are all closing for me," said Guti.

"I was improving as a midfielder when the club signed Zidane. Then I started to come on as a forward and along came Ronaldo. At the moment, I'm in the national team as a midfielder and Beckham's coming."

"I'm a professional and I want to play football. If it's not here it will have to be somewhere else."

Asked about his preferred destination, Guti said he would be interested in a move to Italy.

"I like to get to know new places and Rome, especially, and Milan are interesting," he said.

Meanwhile, Real's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo gave an effusive welcome to David Beckham on Wednesday, predicting that the England captain would fit in well at Real Madrid.

"Another excellent player for my team," Ronaldo said on his website at www.ronald9.com.

"With people like him I'm sure we'll continue playing well and enjoying our football. I send a very warm welcome to David."

However, Real's captain Fernando Hierro was lukewarm in his welcome comments. Hierro said on Wednesday the team had no time to think about Beckham with the league title still up for grabs.

Beckham's signing from United was announced on Tuesday, five days before Real's decisive final league game at home to Athletic Bilbao, a match they need to win to be certain of claiming the championship.

"We don't have much to say about the reinforcements brought in by the club," was Hierro's curt response to a question about Beckham.

"We understand he's a great player and we wish him the best but to leave."

he's not going to help us win the league. Next season we'll welcome him like any other player."

Beckham is the fourth world class player to join Real Madrid in

the last three years, following the signings of Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo.



PHOTO: AFP

HAVE YOU HEARD THE LATEST JOKE? Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo (R) tells something interesting to teammates Steve MacManaman (L) and Claude Makelele, during a training session in Madrid on June 18.