

I'll be back, says Becks

AFP, Tokyo

England captain David Beckham promised his Japanese fans Saturday that he will be back in Tokyo in two months as a member of his new club Real Madrid.

"I will be back in August because I will come back with Real Madrid. We are playing here," he told about 1,000 fans who came to a promotional event in Yokohama, south of Tokyo.

The Spanish club will visit Japan for a friendly match with FC Tokyo of J-League on August 5.

Real Madrid said Tuesday Beckham had agreed to a transfer from English Premiership champions Manchester United in a deal worth up to 35 million euros (41.25 million dollars).

Beckham and his pop star wife Victoria came to Japan on Wednesday as part of an Asia-wide publicity extravaganza.

Since arriving here, Beckham has already filmed a series of television interviews and other performances and visited an elementary school.

The Beckham couple's advertising contracts with a major confectionery company and a beauty treatment company -- two prime sponsors of their Japan visit -- are estimated to be worth 500 million yen (4.2 million dollars) each, according to advertising industry sources.

The couple will leave Tokyo Sunday for visits to Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand as part of the promotional tour analysts believe will highlight Beckham's unrivalled ability to open up the Asian market for Real Madrid, or any other club of his choice.

From Bangkok to Beijing, Singapore to Seoul, the English captain is idolised for his combination of football skills, charm and good looks.

Premier League TV deal under scrutiny

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission said Friday it was examining a new package for English Premier League television rights after crying foul over the current regime.

The Premier League on Tuesday unveiled a tender for the 2004-7 rights that comprises three separate packages for broadcasters -- one each for Saturday, Sunday (the most lucrative) and Monday.

The EU's executive arm, which in December complained that the League's current deal with BSkyB satellite television was anti-competitive, said it was examining the new rights offer as a matter of course.

"We have received the proposal and we are assessing that proposal," said a spokesman for Competition Commissioner Mario Monti.

Asked whether the Commission would look askance at one broadcaster snapping up all three Premiership TV deals, the spokesman said: "That depends on whether the packages are tendered and everybody has a chance to buy them.

"Our line is clear that as many different buyers as possible fosters competition," he added.

In December, the European Commission formally complained to the Premier League over its sale of TV rights on the grounds it amounted to "price-fixing."

Under the current arrangement, the Premier League sold packages of media rights on behalf of member clubs to television companies in Britain and Ireland on an exclusive basis.

The result was that only 25 per cent of Premier League matches were broadcast live by BSkyB in Britain, or 66 games, said the Commission.

Under the new rights offer, a total of 138 live matches will be up for grabs, with terrestrial broadcasters in with a shout of securing some of the rights.

Forlan to fight for MU spot

BBC ONLINE, London

Manchester United striker Diego Forlan will not be leaving Old Trafford this summer, according to the player's agent.

The Uruguayan forward has been linked with a move to Spanish First Division club Seville, who were reported to have taken the first steps to sign him.

But both Forlan's representative, Daniel Bolotincoff, and Seville said the speculation was way off the mark.

"Diego is very happy at Manchester United," Bolotincoff told this website.

"No offer has been made for Forlan and he does not want to leave Manchester United in any case.

"He wants to see out his contract with the club and feels very well there.

"Diego is prepared to be patient and wait for his first-team opportunities."



PHOTO: AFP

New Zealand's Vaughan Coveny (R) vies with Colombian midfielder Elkin Murillo during their Confederations Cup match on June 20.

FRANCE VS NEW ZEALAND

Gunning for top spot



REUTERS, Paris

Defending champions France will be looking to secure top spot in Confederations Cup Group A when they entertain New Zealand at the Stade de France on Sunday.

The French are the first side through to the last four after hard-earned victories over Colombia and Japan.

They lead the table on six points, while Japan and Colombia, both on three points, meet in a decisive match at St Etienne.

Top spot would assure France of a semi-final at the Stade de France against the second team in Group B, avoiding another trip away from their training camp of Clairefontaine.

Far from their best so far, the European champions will still be hot favourites against the All Whites, who have conceded six goals in two games and scored only one.

France, deprived of playmaker Zinedine Zidane and midfielders Patrick Vieira and Claude Makelele, have lacked inspiration but shown they are still a hard team to beat.

Coach Jacques Santini will have to reshuffle his starting line-up after

a tough game against the Japanese in St Etienne on Friday left several players tired or injured.

"France must win this final round match," Santini said.

"But we will have to spare some players. (Midfielder) Jerome Rothen sustained an ankle injury.

"Robert Pires -- who captained France for the first time -- is exhausted while Ousmane Dabo finished the match with cramp. The one-day break will be what we badly need."

Santini said Monaco playmaker Ludovic Giuly would start the match. Giuly is the last outfield player to get a game in the tournament.

Santini will have to do without defender Willy Sagnol and goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, two key players in the side's defensive set-up.

Sagnol, arguably the best French player against Japan, was sent off in injury time and is suspended, while Barthez is about to become a father.

"Fabien is not going back with us to Paris. He will return some time before the semi-final," French team press officer Philippe Tournon said.

This could give youthful Nantes goalkeeper Mickael Landreau the opportunity to earn his second cap.

Landreau played in a match of the Confederations Cup in Japan two years ago.

The All Whites can expect a repeat of their previous campaign in Mexico in 1999 when they finished with three consecutive defeats in the first round.

Mike Waitt's side hung on for

about an hour against Colombia before they caved in physically and conceded three goals in the last 30 minutes.

"We don't give anything up," said Waitt. "We will try to do our best against the French."

JAPAN VS COLOMBIA

A semifinal spot is up for grabs in the day's other game when battle-weary Japan and Colombia meet in Group A at St Etienne.

Both sides need to draw on all their physical and mental resources for a third match in five days, though the greater pressure will be on Colombia, who need a win to progress.

The problem facing Japan coach Zico and his Colombian counterpart Francisco Maturana is that both have relied heavily on the same key players -- and are now obliged to gamble.

Turning to their best players for a third time is bound to invite either a below-par performance or injury -- or both -- while resting them would hit their qualifying chances.

Japan, the more impressive looking of the two contenders, have fielded identical starting line-ups for Wednesday's 3-0 win over New Zealand and Friday's hardly deserved 2-1 defeat by France.

In particular, they have counted on Shunsuke Nakamura, scorer of three of their four goals, skipper Hidetoshi Nakata, scorer of the other, and Junichi Inamoto to provide a tough but creative midfield.

Colombia, who made only one

Colombia stay in hunt



AFP, Lyon

Colombia got their stuttering Confederations Cup campaign back on the rails over Friday with a 3-1 group A win over plucky Oceania champions New Zealand.

Having gone down 1-0 to France in their tournament opener earlier in the week thanks to a disputable penalty, Colombia came into this match knowing that their reputation and that of their coach Francisco Maturana were on the line.

And the talented South Americans gave the recently-appointed Colombian a nervous wait before finally hitting back with three goals - all of them stylish efforts - during a second half in which New Zealand were reduced to 10 men but were saved from further punishment by the heroics of keeper Michael Utting.

Maturana was full of praise for his squad.

"It's a match that really pleased me, where we learnt a lot, above all to be patient," said Maturana.

"The first half was a little surprising, but the team showed their intelligence by reacting.

"If you think that Colombia waited until the second half to play, it only seems like that. The best tactic is always to score. When you have scored it becomes easier to play."

New Zealand, fresh from a 3-0 mauling by Japan in midweek, started the match sprightly and had

Colombia in a flutter in the opening stages before grabbing a shock opener through Raffaele de Gregorio in the 25th minute.

De Gregorio would not like to admit it, but his long-range effort had something of the Monty Python about it - after picking up the ball he stumbled, miskicked and fell into a defender but regained his composure just in time to see his shot fly past the static Colombian keeper Oscar Cordoba.

Nevertheless, the All Whites made the most of a pathetic first half performance from Colombia - given their status on the world stage - and came close to building on their shock lead on a number of occasions.

Colombia however emerged a different team altogether after the break and quickly took control of the game before moving up a gear.

After watching Jorge Lopez fire a long-range freekick over Utting's crossbar in the 52nd minute, the South Americans were rejoicing when Lopez sent a rasping shot from 30 yards out past big defender Danny Hall and past a helpless Utting in the New Zealand goal.

Colombia's equaliser opened the floodgates and Utting's work was cut out for the rest of the half.

In the 65th minute he did well to come out and block a cross near his right-hand post to quash another attack and again to parry a curling freekick just outside his left hand post two minutes later.

What should have been a sure goal for Colombia was blocked again by the King keeper when a close-range header from an unmarked Arnulfo Valentierra was heading towards the net.

New Zealand were then dealt a blow when Oldham Athletic's Chris Killen was sent off for a tackle on

Martinez. The decision was disputable, but having received a yellow card in the first half Killen was given his marching orders.

From then on Colombia enjoyed every ounce of their advantage.

Their second goal came courtesy of Nantes striker Mario Yepes, who with his back to goal on the edge of the box flicked the ball up before turning to his left and firing the ball past a flailing Utting.

The South Americans were celebrating minutes later when Giovanni Hernandez, who was given plenty of time on the edge of the box, linked well with Victor Aristizabal before firing a left-foot shot into the roof of Utting's net.

The Kiwis could have suffered further damage had Utting not held his nerve in the closing stages.

After a volley by Noah Hickey which flew over the bar, at the other end Utting performed even more heroics to first keep out Valentierra then Aristizabal before denying Hernandez his second goal of the match.

New Zealand coach Mick Waitt said that maybe his side had peaked too soon in the first half and suffered badly from the sending off of Killen.

"We really played well in the first half," said Waitt.

"But maybe we scored a bit too soon. At half time the message was 'don't change anything'. It's quite unusual for us to find ourselves in that position (leading).

"But the sending off of Chris Killen was the turning point in the match. I think he deserved the second warning, but not the first.

Playing for 25 minutes at ten against such a team in such heat, it wasn't possible."

Seaman thanks Wenger

AFP, London

Manchester City keeper David Seaman has poured praise on his former boss at Arsene Wenger, saying the Arsenal manager had been a gentleman throughout his painful departure from Highbury.

The 39-year-old Seaman was eased out of the Gunners squad after 13 years between the sticks - a painful episode which he said was made all the easier by Wenger's softly softly approach.

"Arsene Wenger was a complete gentleman about everything," Seaman, who joined City on a one-year deal after being told by Wenger that he would be bringing in another top-level keeper in over the summer, told BBC Radio.

"He said to me 'this is what I have got to offer, if you don't take it I fully respect the decision you make', and you can't be any fairer than that.

"It was a massive wrench to leave Arsenal. I've got great friends there, great memories and the relationship I had with the fans was fantastic and I'd just like to give a massive, massive thank you to all the Gooners," added Seaman.



AFP, Rio de Janeiro

The Brazilian sports press on Friday lamented the world champions "bitter return" to the Stade de France for the first time since their World Cup loss five years ago.

In their first ever defeat to an African side Brazil were stunned 1-0 by Olympic champions Cameroon in their Confederations Cup group B opener in the French capital following a stunning late goal from Samuel Eto'o.

It was the scene of Brazil's loss in the World Cup finals five years ago to hosts France.

"A bitter return," headlined the O Dia sports section.

"Cursed stadium," said the

Gascoigne yet to return

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese B-league team Gansu Tianma have sent a letter to former England international Paul Gascoigne asking the absent midfielder to contact the club or risk a breach of contract.

The club have been unable to contact Gascoigne, 36, who was due to return from a stint in alcohol rehab in the United States on June 10, Gansu Tianma general manager Zhang Tongpo told Reuters by telephone on Saturday.

"We can't find him," he said.

"We sent him an official letter yesterday. If he doesn't give us any response by 8 pm Beijing time on Monday, we would take it as violating the contract."

Zhang said the club had complained to the China Football Association asking officials to contact the English Football Association in order to pressure Gascoigne to fulfil his duties.

"We hope he will come back," he said.

"We still respect him a lot."

The former England midfielder, who checked into a clinic in Arizona in April, signed a one-year contract with Gansu Tianma as player-coach in January.

Gascoigne won 57 caps for his country and helped England reach the semifinals of the 1990 World Cup.

His career has been plagued by injuries, a volatile temper and sporadic bouts of heavy drinking.

Brazilian press bitter

Jornal dos Sports, noting that the "ghost of Stade de France once again haunted Brazil, this time in the shape of Cameroon."

"What type of football was this?" "This isn't Brazilian football!" were the indignant cries of fans on a "disastrous game," according to the Jornal do Brazil, who described the national performance as "apathetic, mediocre and sleepy" and "lacking creativity and skill".

The commentators were unanimous in hailing the superiority of the Africans who played "almost perfectly" and warned that the world champions, now bottom of group B, face a crucial match against the United States in Lyon on Saturday.

Others played on the name Cameroon, coming from the Portuguese word "Camarao", which means shrimp.

The daily O Dia front page headline above a photo of Ronaldinho trying to dispossess a Cameroon player was "The Brazilian team are strangled by a shrimp," while the Jornal dos Sports said "Cameroon fry Brazil."