

Ronaldinho sees nothing wrong

AFP, London

Ronaldinho said Saturday he had no regrets about choosing Barcelona over Manchester United ahead of the two teams' clash in the United States on Monday.

Responding to a suggestion from United skipper Roy Keane that he needed his "head examining" for snubbing the chance to move to Old Trafford Ronaldinho said: "I read what Roy Keane said and I think he has made a big mistake. His comments went too far."

The Brazilian World Cup winner told The Sun: "I chose the Barca option and United have to accept that sportingly. I don't regret it. There will be a lot of samba dancing this season and United will be watching it on TV."

"If Alex Ferguson is angry with me, that's his problem. He knows these things happen in football."

Looking ahead to Monday's game in Philadelphia Ronaldinho said: "For me, the game is just another pre-season friendly, where results are beside the point."

"I don't know if I'm going to play, but if I do I'll do so without thinking anything special. The matter, as far as I'm concerned, is closed, win or lose."

Oviedo face relegation

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Oviedo will be relegated to Spain's regional fourth division next season after failing to reach agreement with their players over unpaid wages.

"We did everything we could, making a final effort, but in the end it wasn't possible," Oviedo president Manuel Lafuente told Spanish newspapers.

Oviedo, who were playing in the top flight as recently as the 2000-01 season, failed to meet a midnight deadline to settle the dispute with their players, who had demanded bank guarantees for the money owed.

The club, who lost their second division status at the end of last season after finishing in the relegation zone, will drop down a further rung.

That will see them playing next season against amateur sides in one of the 17 regional leagues of the fourth division.

"Our intention at the moment is to carry on next season," Lafuente told Cadena Serradio.

Oviedo, founded in 1926, have played a total of 38 seasons in Spain's first division.

They were the second club to be relegated over financial problems in the past week.

Compostela were demoted to division three on Thursday after they were unable to settle a claim by their players over unpaid wages.

Leeds allow Martyn to go

AFP, London

England international goalkeeper Nigel Martyn has been told he can leave Leeds United, the club admitted on Friday.

The 36-year-old has been linked with a move to Premiership rivals Chelsea but he was determined to stay at Elland Road and challenge Paul Robinson for the position of first choice keeper.

But manager Peter Reid insisted that Robinson will start the new season between the posts.

"Paul will have the number one shirt and both he and Nigel will be challenging each other," Reid told www.leedsunited.com.

"Nothing is concrete at the moment but I have too much respect for Nigel as a goalkeeper and professional not to let him know of any involvement considering he is 37 next month."

"You have to be fair to players, so if anything comes up I will let him know and have a chat with him."

Martyn has played 273 games for the club since his switch from Crystal Palace in January 1996.

Mezague regains consciousness

AFP, Marseille

Cameroon international Valery Mezague has come round after his operation on Thursday for injuries suffered in a car accident the previous night.

The 19-year-old Montpellier midfielder underwent surgery on a fractured skull at a hospital in Marseille and although he is now awake his surgeon said it was still too early to give a prognosis.

Mezague, who was Montpellier's top scorer with six goals last season, will remain in intensive care "for some time", a hospital spokesman said.

He played in the final of the Confederations Cup against France on the Cameroon team rocked by the death of Marc-Vivien Foe in the semi-final against Colombia at Lyon.



Bayern Munich's Brazilian midfielder Ze Roberto (R) scores the opening goal against Eintracht Frankfurt on August 1.

Bundesliga

Bayern start in style

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich started the defence of their German title with a comfortable 3-1 win over promoted Eintracht Frankfurt on Friday.

The Bundesliga season opener was as one-sided as expected, Bayern showing their class and Eintracht displaying their limitations.

The Bayern fans packing the Olympic stadium watched their team take the lead on 16 minutes with a low drive from the edge of the

box by Brazilian midfielder Ze Roberto.

Bosnian midfielder Hasan Salihovic doubled the advantage with a headed goal from a free kick four minutes later and Peru striker Claudio Pizarro added a third three minutes from the break, also with a header.

With the issue beyond doubt, Bayern slowed down in the second half and their visitors reduced the arrears, Albania midfielder Ervin Skela scoring from a free kick in the 68th minute.

However Eintracht, German champions in 1959 and UEFA Cup

winners in 1980 but no longer a major force, showed little on the night and had to wait 60 minutes for a real scoring chance, Skela rattling the crossbar from a free kick.

"In the first half, we played at a high pace and didn't allow Eintracht any scoring opportunity," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"In the second half, we tried to control the game. Conceding a goal from a free kick is something that can happen, but it's true that we looked a bit nervous at the back."

Hitzfeld witnessed a strong performance from gifted Germany midfielder Sebastian Deisler, who

will be eager to shine this season after injuries ruined his debut season at the club.

Bayern kept busy in the last term by winning their 18th German title, and also the German Cup to clinch their fourth domestic double.

But what they really want this season is rehabilitation in Europe after making an embarrassing first-stage exit last year from the Champions League.

There are six matches on Saturday, with Borussia Dortmund visiting neighbours Schalke 04 in the highlight of the programme.

Ajax hold Liverpool

Football

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Nigerian striker Obafemi Martins scored twice as Inter Milan eased to a 3-0 win over Galatasaray in the Amsterdam tournament on Friday.

In the night's other game English club Liverpool and hosts Ajax drew 0-0.

Inter, who finished second last season in Italy's Serie A, were without a host of leading players including strikers Hernan Crespo and Christian Vieri.

But their replacements had an easy night against the 2000 UEFA Cup winners from Turkey.

Umit Karan and Hakan Sukur both threatened to score early on for Galatasaray but eight minutes before halftime Inter took the lead when Martins headed home a cross by skipper Javier Zanetti.

Soon after Luis Cesar Prates struck the crossbar with a free kick for the Turkish side.

Inter, though, doubled their lead after 64 minutes when Martins collected a neat pass and gave Galatasaray keeper Farid Mondragon no chance.

Two minutes later substitute Mario Rebecchi made it 3-0 and Galatasaray's misery was complete when striker Hasan Sas was red-



Ajax players Rafael van der Vaart (R) and Wesley Sonck contest for the ball with Liverpool's Sami Hyypia in the Amsterdam tournament.

carded for a second bookable offence eight minutes from the end.

Both Liverpool and Ajax missed a handful of chances in the second match in the Amsterdam Arena.

Rafael van der Vaart, playing in attack, was Ajax's most dangerous player and he forced an early save from Liverpool keeper Jerzy Dudek.

Liverpool's new signing Harry Kewell, back after an ankle injury, played on the right side of midfield and set up a chance for Czech striker Milan Baros soon after.

Two minutes before the break

Dudek made two excellent saves within seconds as he first blocked a Van der Vaart shot with his feet and then deflected a shot from Tomas Galasek just over the crossbar.

In the second half Kewell, El Hadji Diouf and Danny Murphy missed good chances for Liverpool.

In the dying minutes both sides had their opportunity to grab the win but Dudek saved twice from Van der Vaart and ex-Liverpool player Jari Litmanen, while Emile Heskey headed straight at Ajax goalkeeper Maarten Stekelenburg.

Pizarro not for sale

AFP, Munich

Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, the Bayern Munich president, has insisted that the German champions will not part with striker Claudio Pizarro despite their interest in Dutch international Roy Makaay.

French giants Lyon are believed to have tabled an offer for the Peruvian marksman, who scored in Friday's opening 3-1 win over Eintracht Frankfurt, but Rummenigge maintains Pizarro's future lies at the Olympic Stadium.

"We will not sell Pizarro," Rummenigge told German sports agency SID.

"Last season he played really well and he has what it takes to be a goalscorer."

Former Werder Bremen frontman Pizarro, who is contracted in Bavaria until 2005, scored 15 Bundesliga goals last season but that has not stopped Bayern trying to capture Deportivo La Coruna forward Makaay for around 18 million euros.

Geovanni moves to Benfica

AFP, Lisbon

Barcelona's Brazil international Geovanni, loaned out to Benfica since the start of the year, has cemented his ties with the Portuguese club by signing a four-year contract.

The 23-year-old striker who joined Barcelona last year was under contract with the Spanish side until 2006.

The deal was confirmed by Geovanni's agent, Roberto Assuncao, in the local press.

Geovanni endured a frustrating time of it at the Nou Camp when he was unable to hold down a regular first team place.

Ligue 1

Lille shock Lyon

Football

REUTERS, Paris

Midfielder Jean Makoun scored on his debut as Lille kicked off the French Ligue 1 season with a surprise 1-0 victory over champions Olympique Lyon on Friday.

The 20-year-old converted a fine cross by Gregory Tafforeau to beat Lyon's international goalkeeper Gregory Coupet from close range in the 12th minute.

The defeat extended Lyon's appalling record of not having won their opening game of the season since they returned to the top flight in 1989.

The visitors dominated for most of the match but Lille proved disciplined in defence and Lyon created just one clear chance to equalise -- when defender Edmilson headed a free kick from Vikash Dhorasoo just over the crossbar on the hour.

It served to highlight the fact that Lyon have not yet found a reliable replacement for goal scorer Sonny Anderson who joined Spanish side of Villarreal after his contract with Lyon ended in May.

Lyon chairman Jean-Michel Aulas said the club was set to sign a striker on Saturday but refused to provide any further details.

Lille also missed a great opportunity to wrap up the match when striker Mile Sterjovski hit the woodwork 15 minutes from time.

"Lille are always a difficult side to play," Lyon midfielder Eric Carriere said. "They defended really well tonight and we found it hard to break through."

"Obviously, it was not the result

we were looking for but there is still a long road to walk and we are used to tough challenges."

Lille coach Claude Puel said: "We have a very young team but they are gifted. It's a very satisfying result."

"We could have shown more efficiency on our counter-attacking moves but I'm happy with the out-

come. We are league leaders tonight and this is something which doesn't happen often."

On Saturday, title favourites Olympique Marseille are away to En Avant Guingamp while Monaco, second last season, face a stiff test at home against Girondins Bordeaux.



Lille forward Chilian Hector Tapia (L) vies with Lyon's forward Florent Malouda in a French Ligue 1 match on August 1.

Villa in the red

Football

REUTERS, London

Aston Villa manager David O'Leary could lose up to nine members of his first-team squad at the end of next season as part of a cost-cutting drive by the English premier league club.

Villa revealed full-year pre-tax losses of 11.6 million pounds (18.6 million dollars) on Friday, up from 400,000 pounds the previous year, and finance director Mark Ansell said that nine players whose contracts expire in June 2004 would either not be replaced or replaced cheaply.

"Aston Villa can no longer rely on profits on player sales to absorb excess player costs and has embarked on a strategy of reducing salary and amortisation (transfer

payment) costs," Ansell said in a plc statement.

"However we still have to deal with players under continuing contracts. Nine players in the first-team squad come out of contract in July 2004, some of whom will not be replaced and some will be replaced with reduced amortisation and salary costs," he said.

"Recent and future purchases will be made with a strategy of reducing total player costs as soon as it is commercially practicable," he added.

The club did not name the players whose contracts end next season.

The losses at Villa, who finished fifth from bottom of the premier league last season, were due to a combination of poor performances on the pitch, which reduced television income, and the declining value of players in a tough transfer market.

Wages and salaries also rose. Villa chairman Doug Ellis said first-team performances had been "extremely disappointing" last season.

"It was unacceptable to directors and supporters alike that, given the investment in the squad in recent years, not only was the team not in the top half of the table alongside clubs of similar investment, but it was only in the final weeks of the season that we secured our place in the Premiership for the 2003/04 season," he said.

The poor results on the pitch led manager Graham Taylor to resign. He was replaced by former Leeds United manager O'Leary on May 20.

Ellis said at a time when a few clubs had been able to afford 'mega transfers', the challenge for a club such as Villa to compete for honours while operating within its resources was extremely difficult.

Chelsea parade stars

Football

REUTERS, London

Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri vowed to build a side able to compete with Europe's finest as he paraded the English Premier League club's five close-season signings on Friday.

The Italian said the purchase of new midfielders Damien Duff and Geremi, defenders Glen Johnson and Wayne Bridge and goalkeeper Marco Ambrosio represented a major step towards competing with the likes of Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool.

The spending spree at the west London club, who finished fourth last season to earn a Champions League qualifying berth, has topped 37 million pounds (59.32 million dollars) since Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich took over a month ago.

But Ranieri knows money alone will not guarantee success. "The owner said you can buy the players but not the wins. It is important to

work hard. I think we all want to win, the owner, me, the players ... we all want to win," he told a news conference.

"Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool ... they are better than us because they have a bigger squad. But now we are building."

"The first step is to build a group, build a squad. This is very important. I have confidence in myself, in my players and of course in my new owner. We are building a good team, a team like Real Madrid, Milan, Manchester United."

Ranieri did not confirm if any further signings would be made before the transfer window closes at the end of August.

Media reports have linked Chelsea with an unlikely swoop for Real Madrid striker Raul.

Manchester United's Argentine midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron and Leeds United goalkeeper Nigel Martyn.

"I don't want to speak about names. Now it's Martyn, then it will be (Real Madrid striker) Raul. It's all bullshit," Ranieri joked.

Ranieri said he did not feel under any more pressure than before

because of the new club's new wealth and consequent high expectations for next season.

"If I didn't like pressure I'd change my job. All managers have pressure. The pressure is good. It's my life," he said.

Chelsea's record signing, 17-million-pound Damien Duff, said he tried not to think about the price on his head and just wanted to concentrate on playing football.

The Ireland winger said he had thought long and hard about leaving Blackburn to join Chelsea.

"I had no reason to leave Blackburn, I was happy there," the 24-year-old said. "I rang everybody I knew. I wasn't going to make a snap decision. But it will be a big new challenge."

Duff said that, like his manager, the players did not feel burdened by expectations because of the club's spending power.

"Every year Chelsea expect to do well ... We're just going to try to get the right results," he said.

Former Belgium coach Thys dies

Football

REUTERS, Brussels

Former Belgium coach Guy Thys, who guided the national team to the 1986 World Cup semifinals, died on Friday at the age of 80 after a long illness.

Thys was at the helm of the Belgian side from 1976 until August 1989. Following a six-month break, he took charge of the side again in February 1990 after Walter Meeuws was sacked.

Thys was in charge for 114 games in total, winning 50, drawing 27 and losing 37. He finally relinquished the post in May 1991.

His finest hour came when Belgium reached the last four of the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, where they lost 2-0 to Diego Maradona-inspired Argentina in Mexico City. Thys also led Belgium to the final of the 1980 European Championship. They lost 2-1 to West Germany in



GUY THYS

Wolves catch Iversen

REUTERS, London

Premier league newcomers Wolverhampton Wanderers signed two strikers on Friday in the shape of Norway's Steffen Iversen and Senegal's Henri Camara. Iversen joined the club on a one-year deal from Tottenham Hotspur after Senegal's Camara arrived from French club Sedan for 1.5 million pounds (2.41 million dollars).

"Steffen had a year of his contract to run at White Hart Lane but has agreed a termination with the London club. He has now signed a one-year deal with Wolves," Wolves said on their official website on Friday.

Iversen played 177 games for Spurs, scoring 47 goals, after joining them from Rosenborg Trondheim in 1996. He has been named in Dave Jones's Wolves squad for Saturday's pre-season friendly at Midlands rivals Coventry City.

Iversen and Camara, who are both 26 years old, join defenders Jody Craddock, Oleg Luzhny and Isaac Okoronkwo among the close-season signings at Wolves.



THE REVOLUTION HAS BEGUN: Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri (3rd from R) stands with his newest players Glen Johnson (L), Damien Duff (2nd L), Wayne Bridge (3rd from L), Marco Ambrosio (2nd from R), and Geremi (R at Stamford Bridge on August 1.