

Ayala would prefer MU

AFP, London

Valencia's Argentinian defender Roberto Ayala, linked in recent weeks with English Premiership side Liverpool, on Sunday turned his attention to Manchester United.

Liverpool denied reports that they were interested in signing Ayala and the 30-year-old centre-back insisted that Old Trafford was his preferred destination anyway.

"I turned down Liverpool because my opinion is that if I leave Valencia it will be for a bigger club," Ayala told the Sunday Mirror.

"Manchester United are different. They are the kind of club who interest me a lot. If they came in it would be impossible to say no - I think I would be a success there."

Before joining Valencia, Ayala struggled at AC Milan, but the former Napoli and River Plate man settled well in Spain.

United are currently short of defensive options with Wes Brown and Gary Neville out injured, having lost Laurent Blanc and David May in the close-season.

But chief executive Peter Kenyon said Saturday that they were unlikely to make any more signings before the transfer deadline at the end of the month.

Brave Makelele!

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's French midfielder Claude Makelele has served notice that he intends to defy the Spanish champions and play in the international friendly against Switzerland next week, according to press reports here on Sunday.

Makelele is refusing to train with Real Madrid due to a salary dispute, and the 30-year-old intends to join his national squad in Geneva despite the opposition of the Spanish side, the daily El Mundo reported.

"It would be another mistake to his credit," said Real sporting director Jorge Valdano. "We have faxed the French federation outlining the player's situation. He is not authorised to travel."

Real doctors have recommended that Makelele not play in Real's friendly Sunday against Valencia or France's friendly against Switzerland next Wednesday because of a "slight change in his emotional state provoked by his personal and professional situation".

Makelele is said to be unhappy with his comparatively low wages, which are reportedly only a fifth of what the club's high-profile stars like Ronaldo, Zinedine Zidane and Raul earn.

He was hoping to double the reported monthly salary of 125,000 euros (141,000 dollars) he currently earns at Real by joining English Premiership side Chelsea, who have since distanced themselves from a deal.

The player joined Real in 2000 after two seasons with Celta Vigo, having earlier made his name with French league side Nantes.

Former Barca boss dead

REUTERS, Madrid

Former Barcelona president Enric Llaudet has died aged 86 after a lengthy illness, the club said on Friday.

Llaudet, who was Barcelona president between 1961 and 1968, presided over a difficult period in the Catalan club's history in which they were largely overshadowed by arch-rivals Real Madrid.

Barca never won the league title while he was in charge, but they did win the domestic Cup competition in 1963 and the Fairs Cup in 1966.

Llaudet is best remembered for assuring the economic future of the club by selling the old Las Cortes stadium.

Batigol in Qatar

AFP, Doha

Argentinian international striker Gabriel Batistuta arrived here on Saturday to start his new career with Qatari league club Al-Arabi.

According to the official Qatar News Agency, QNA, the 34-year-old arrived from Italy, where he had been on Inter Milan's books last season, accompanied by his family, manager and medical personnel.

His two-year contract is worth eight millions dollars - 5.5 million for the first season and 2.5 million for the second, according to Argentine press reports.

Batistuta, his country's leading goal scorer, will play in the Qatar championship which has already attracted other veterans such as Germany's Steffen Effenberg, who is also at Al-Arabi, Mario Basler of Germany, signed by Al-Rayyan and French defender Frank Leboeuf at Al-Sadd.



SUPERSTAR STUFF! Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo (L) evading the tackle of Bolton Wanderers' Stylianos Giannakopoulos at Old Trafford on August 16.

PHOTO: AFP

Taking their breath away

Football

AFP, Manchester

David Beckham might be gone, but according to Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson the club already has a new hero -- Portuguese teenager Cristiano Ronaldo.

Although not among the scorers as United brushed aside Bolton 4-0 in the opening salvo of their Premiership title defence, it was Ronaldo's name the Old Trafford crowd chanted as the match finished.

The 18-year-old who cost United more than 12 million pounds (19 million dollars) over the summer delighted the fans and terrorised Bolton's defence during his 30-minute second-half debut.

He showed astonishing touch and poise, even winning a penalty which Ruud van Nistelrooy saw saved.

"It looks like the fans have a new hero," Ferguson said of the player he has given Beckham's number

seven shirt, one formerly filled by Eric Cantona and Bryan Robson.

"It was a marvelous debut, almost unbelievable. I felt his penetration could make a difference for us," he said.

"We have to be careful with the boy. You must remember he is only 18. We are going to have to gauge when we use him."

It has been a big week for Ronaldo, who followed up his mid-week United move by being named in the Portuguese squad for the first time for Wednesday's friendly with Kazakhstan.

Despite his usual hostile attitude to releasing players for international friendlies, Ferguson even gave this his blessing.

"It is a good thing he is going with Portugal," Ferguson said.

"He has the chance to talk with Luis Figo and Rui Costa in his own country and that experience will be invaluable when he comes back to us."

Ronaldo's brief heroics even overshadowed Ryan Giggs, himself a former teenage superstar, who scored twice.

The Welshman showed he can fill in admirably for Beckham's free kicks, opening the scoring on 35 minutes with a stunning strike before adding a second with a 74th-minute knock-in, Paul Scholes and Ruud van Nistelrooy completing the rout.

Giggs was also effusive in his assessment of Ronaldo.

"There was the same buzz in there about Ronaldo as there was when we first saw Eric Cantona. He lifted the crowd and the players and there are not many people who can do that. He's really an outstanding prospect," he said.

Van Nistelrooy got a touch which Jaaskelainen could not hold, allowing Giggs the easiest of finishes.

Scholes controversially broke the Bolton offside trap and rounded Jaaskelainen to tap home the third, before van Nistelrooy thundered home another three minutes from time.

The goal set a new Premiership record, the Dutchman having scored in nine consecutive league matches, but as the final whistle sounded, excited home supporters were left to reflect that there's more than one Ronaldo.

Ronaldo also won paper notices in Sunday's British papers.

The Sunday Telegraph proclaimed in a banner headline that "A Star is Born".

penalty after being fouled by Ricardo Gardner, only for van Nistelrooy to fail.

It was a brief reprieve. The Bolton defence had been unhinged by Ronaldo's arrival and they were still furiously backtracking when the youngster delivered a far-post cross which Scholes eventually turned back into the six-yard box.

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The report offered praise of the English champions' new acquisition, comparing him to previous illustrious holders of the shirt including Eric Cantona and George Best.

"Even Best did not make a debut as exhilarating as Ronaldo - pacy, two-footed, willing to take people on and not afraid to take a kick in the process," the paper said.

The Mail on Sunday described Ronaldo as "the new Cantona" and said Old Trafford proclaimed "an instant legend" after he helped set up Giggs's second and United's third goal.

"Just this once," wrote the Sunday Times, "all the hype and hullabaloo could be justified."

"This precocious 18-year-old's mesmeric feet are destined to give a few defenders twisted blood as they used to say of the number seven par excellence, George Best."

The People summed up its feelings for the newcomer in one two-page headline: "Who Needs Beckham?"

Bundesliga

No problems for Bayern

Football

AFP, Berlin

All eyes were on Bayern Munich's 18.75-million-euro capture Roy Makaay at the Olympic Stadium, as the Dutch striker made his Bundesliga debut, but he failed to find the net as Bayern eased to a 2-0 win over VfL Bochum.

Makaay scored a hat-trick the last time he played at the Olympic Stadium, but had to be content with setting up a goal for strike partner Claudio Pizarro after 20 minutes.

The former Deportivo La Coruna man released Jens Jeremies who crossed for Pizarro to tap home. The Peruvian has now scored in all three of his Bundesliga outings this season.

A trademark free-kick from Sebastian Deisler with 26 minutes on the clock clinched the three points for the German champions.

Brazilian forward Giovane Elber watched most of the match from the Bayern substitutes' bench before replacing Makaay on 77 minutes.

Bayern's victory kept up the pressure on Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen at the summit as the two clubs renew their rivalry.

"We played really well in the first half but then poorly in the second half," declared Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld. "But everything considered I am happy with the result."

Leverkusen held on to top spot in the Bundesliga and continued their 100 percent start to the season in fine style with a 4-0 triumph over Hannover at the BayArena.

Nine points from the first three matches represents Leverkusen's best ever start to a Bundesliga season and extends coach Klaus Augenthaler's winning streak to five matches.

The 2002 Champions League runners-up, who narrowly escaped relegation last season, had a dream start when Brazilian Franca rifled home his second Bundesliga goal

with just 180 seconds gone.

German international Oliver Neuville then notched a brace before Daniel Bierfoka completed the rout in the 72nd minute with Bayer's fourth.

"Before the match I would have been happy with 1-0 so I of course I am delighted to win 4-0," beamed Augenthaler.

"The important thing now is not to get carried away."

A minute's silence took place before every Bundesliga match out of respect for German World Cup icons Helmut Rahn and Lothar Emmerich who died recently, with Borussia Dortmund players donning black armbands as a tribute to Emmerich.



CLAUDIO PIZARRO

Dortmund rewarded the largest Bundesliga crowd of the day, 74,000 spectators at the Westfalen Stadium, with a 3-1 victory over 1860 Munich.

Brazilian Marcio Amoroso grabbed two in the second half (46, 56) with giant Czech striker Jan Koller also netting on 61 minutes, as Dortmund put their 2-1 Champions League defeat by Club Brugge behind them moving into second place in the Bundesliga.

Hertha Berlin's goal drought continued with the capital club still seeking their first Bundesliga goal after a 0-0 against SC Freiburg.

Another football death

Football

AFP, Singapore

A former Malaysian striker collapsed and died on the football pitch of an apparent heart failure five minutes after the match had started, a local report said Sunday.

Ali Bakar, 56, who was playing for the Malaysian Ex-Internationals against the Ex-Singapore Sultan Gold Cup veterans in a charity match Saturday, collapsed holding his chest in pain as he was about to pass the ball to a team mate, the

New Paper said.

Efforts to revive the him failed and the match was called off.

"The death came as a big shock because Ali was his usual merry self, laughing and joking before the match," said Peter Jalal, one of the match organisers.

He said arrangements were being made to fly Ali's body back to Penang, Malaysia, for burial.

Cameroon international Marc-Vivien Foe collapsed and died of heart problem in the 72nd minute of his country's Confederations Cup semi-final against Colombia on June 26.

Kaka destined for Milan

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Brazil midfielder Kaka will complete his move to European champions AC Milan early next week after arriving in the Italian city at the weekend.

Kaka, who will join Milan from Brazilian club Sao Paulo, will undergo a medical on Monday and is expected to sign a five-year contract with the Italians.

The attacking midfielder, who has cost Milan \$8.2 million according to Italian media reports, will attend Milan's friendly with Juventus later on Sunday after flying into Italy on Saturday.

Milan were not immediately available for comment, but Kaka told the daily Gazzetta dello Sport: "I'm very happy to be here and I hope to go down in the history of Milan."

Kaka joins a large Brazilian contingent at Milan including World Cup captain Cafu, former Barcelona star Rivaldo, defender Roque

Junior, winger Serginho and goalkeeper Dida.

"This is a great club, they are great champions and I'm happy to get to play with them. For me, coming here has been a dream come true," he said.

Gazzetta reported that the transfer includes a sell-on clause which would lead to Sao Paulo picking up 15 percent of any fee should Kaka be sold before 2006.

Kaka was part of the Brazil squad which won the World Cup last year but made only a brief appearance against Costa Rica.

He is a key member of the under-23 side who will feature in next year's Olympic Games and a tall and powerful presence in midfield. Kaka is rated as one of the brightest young players in Brazil and has been closely monitored by many European clubs.

After the arrival of Cafu from AS Roma, Kaka will become Milan's second major signing since winning the Champions League in May with a victory on penalties over fellow Italians Juventus. The Serie A league season begins on August 31



KAKA

Injured Maldini to miss season's start

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini will miss the start of the Serie A season after picking up an ankle injury in training that will sideline him for at least a month.

Italian media reported on Sunday that the former Italy international defender needed to wait for tests on the twisted ankle next week but was certain to miss the European Super Cup game against Porto on August 29 and Milan's opening Serie A fixture against Ancona two days later.

His absence will hand Brazilian international Roque Junior a chance in the centre of the European champions' defence alongside Italian Alessandro Nesta.

Maldini, Italy's most capped player, retired from the national team after the 2002 World Cup.



PAOLO MALDINI

Ligue 1

Champions looking good

Football

AFP, Paris

An opening game hiccup aside Lyon's title defence has got off to a solid start, the champion's 2-0 win over Montpellier Saturday leaving them three points off surprise leaders Lille.

There were also wins for all the other key title contenders including Monaco and Bordeaux but it is Lille who head the table after their third straight win, Toulouse being added to the scalps of Lyon and Paris Saint Germain.

The northern French side have a perfect record of nine points out of nine. They take over at the top from Nice, who are two points behind after a 1-1 draw away to Le Mans.

Next come Nantes with Lyon lurking in fourth.

Claudio Cacapa headed Lyon into an early lead after being set-up by Juninho Pernambucano, then Eric Carriere followed up slotting the ball past keeper Rudy Riou to wrap up the match with less than half an hour played.

Title rivals Monaco, runners-up last season, received the perfect pick-me-up after last week's loss to Lyon with a 2-0 win over Bastia.

Togolese striker Manuel Adebayor, a close season signing from Metz, knocked in his first goal for his new club, with Vassilis Zikos adding Monaco's second.

Zikos' contribution was a stunning free kick driven along the ground which pierced the Bastia wall and flew past keeper Nicolas Penneteau.

Bordeaux, the 1999 champions who were beaten by Montpellier last

week, brushed aside Guingamp 3-1 with a double from Jean-Claude Darcheville to add to the fifth minute effort from their summer signing from Brazil, Deivid.

PSG, striving to cope without the inspiration of Ronaldinho, have had a sluggish start but they posted their first win with a 1-0 defeat of Metz.

PSG had Jerome Leroy to thank for their welcome three points.

Elsewhere, Auxerre beat Strasbourg 3-2 for their first success of the new campaign.

Strasbourg were reduced to nine men with keeper Vincent Fernandez sent off for a foul on Djibril Cisse in the 80th minute and Pontus Famerud receiving the same punishment right on the whistle.

On Sunday Marseille travel to Lens and victory could see them taking over from Lille as leaders.



PHOTO: AP

Argentinian soccer star Gabriel Batistuta meets the press after his arrival in Qatar's capital Doha yesterday.