

Samba in the air again



AFP, Montevideo

Brazil begin their quest for a sixth World Cup crown this weekend as the South American nations set out on a marathon two-year qualifying campaign for the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany.

Brazil, as reigning champions, have not been given direct entry to the finals following a rule change by world football's governing body FIFA. That puts extra pressure on the nine other nations who must join the Brazilians in the fight for one of the four qualification spots while the fifth-placed side enter a playoff.

For the third year running, the ten countries are in one big group and play each other home and away.

For Brazil, qualifying is often the hardest part of their World Cup campaign.

Their record-breaking fifth success in Japan 14 months ago has obliterated the memory of a halting qualifying campaign which saw them hit form late to scrape in as the third of the four qualifiers in 2001.

Argentina meanwhile sailed into the finals as group winners but crashed out in the first round once

they reached Asia. Brazil retain the core of the team that beat Germany 2-0 in the 2002 final in Yokohama as they head for the Colombian city of Barrquilla on Sunday.

Ronaldo, who collected both goals in the final and six others to finish leading scorer for the tournament, has warned his teammates that Colombia could be a tricky prospect after their tenacious performance in this year's Confederations Cup tournament in France.

"Brazil will encounter difficulties, because Colombia have a young team with a lot of good players and

FIXTURES
Saturday: Peru v Paraguay, Ecuador v Venezuela, Argentina-Chile
Sunday: Uruguay v Bolivia, Colombia v Brazil

they will be playing in front of their own fans," said the Real Madrid star.

Colombian goalkeeper Oscar Cordoba says his team have no inferiority complex.

"I know we can beat Brazil," he said. "I say that loud and clear, just as I did before Ecuador beat them in the qualifiers for 2002.

"I don't feel we are any weaker than the Brazilians. Our opponents have some of the best players on the planet but we have Ivan Ramiro Cordoba (of Inter Milan) and Mario Yepes (of Nantes) who are two of the best central defenders in the world."

Carlos Alberto Parreira is back in charge after Luiz Felipe Scolari took over the reins of Portugal, and midfielder playmaker Ronaldinho is suspended, but otherwise the three

R's - Ronaldo, Rivaldo and Roberto Carlos are all back.

So Brazil will expect to have a win under their belts when they face Ecuador in Manaus on Wednesday in their second qualifier.

Argentina welcome Chile to Buenos Aires on Saturday with Marcelo Bielsa, the brother of Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa, retained as coach despite the World Cup humiliation.

Bielsa's major task is blending the talented new blood from the World Youth Cup wins of 1997 and 2001 with the established stars.

He made a plea for a fresh start with a fresh team.

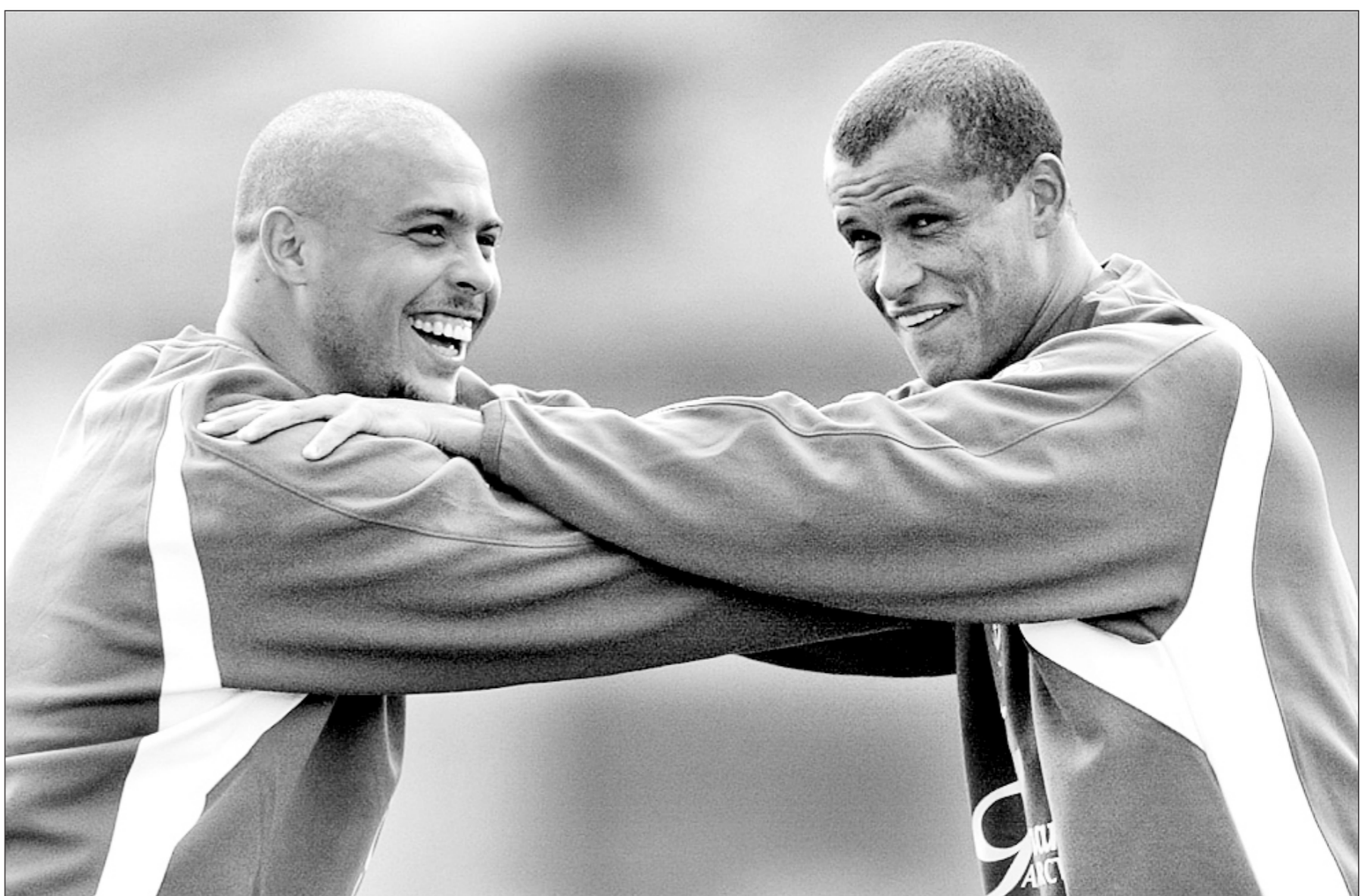
"Doubt and suspicion have fallen on my team and on me. But this team will not fail because it will be focused and work hard."

"There was an exaggerated sense of triumphalism after the qualifiers last time, but now these matches are treated with extreme caution."

Argentina's greatest reason for optimism is the rapid development of Javier Saviola, the Barcelona starlet who was bizarrely left out of the 2002 squad.

Juan Sebastian Veron and Hernan Crespo, now teammates at big-spending English club Chelsea are also in form and could punish Chile who are rebuilding after finishing last in the race for Asia.

In other matches, Paraguay face Peru on Saturday as they bid for a second successive World Cup finals appearance and Uruguay host Bolivia on Sunday.



TIME FOR THOSE 'R' TRICKS AGAIN! Brazilian superstars Ronaldo (L) and Rivaldo of stretch together during a training session at Granja Comary, Teresopolis, 120 Km from Rio de Janeiro on September 7.

World Cup 2010

Libya, Morocco joint hosts?

Football

AFP, Tunis

Libya will launch a joint bid with Tunisia to stage the 2010 World Cup soccer finals, Saadi Kadhafi, the son of the Libyan leader, said on Friday.

South Africa, Egypt, Morocco and Nigeria are the other nations bidding for the World Cup which will definitely be held in Africa under the FIFA scheme to alternate the tournament from continent to continent.

The 30-year-old Kadhafi, on the books of Italian soccer club Perugia, is also bidding to become the president of the African Football Confederation.

Tunisia is organising the 2004 African Nations football finals in January.

Libya bought its way back into the international fold last month when it

formally took responsibility for the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am plane over the Scottish town of Lockerbie that killed 270 people.

It agreed to pay 2.7 billion dollars (2.5 billion euros) to families of the victims, in return for a series of diplomatic measures aimed at ending Libya's status as a supporter of terrorism.

Last week Libya agreed to pay compensation to relatives of the 170 people killed in the 1989 bombing of a French airliner over the Sahara.

And a charity foundation headed by Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi's son said it would pay compensation to the relatives of three victims killed in a 1986 nightclub bombing in Berlin used by US servicemen.

The blast at the La Belle nightclub, popular with US servicemen, killed two American soldiers and a Turkish woman and wounded more than 250 people.

Back-line worries Queiroz

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlos Queiroz admitted on Thursday the club needs new defenders and will sign one when the transfer window re-opens in December.

"The reality is that the squad is a bit short but we have to keep progressing as we are. Our strategy now is to buy in December," Queiroz told Spanish television after seemingly admitting defeat in his attempts to land Valencia stopper Roberto Ayala.

Real Madrid's sporting director Jorge Valdano admitted last Monday Real had to buy and would do so at year's end.

In Tuesday's 1-1 draw at Villarreal, the champions looked uncomfortable at the back having

failed to replace either Julio Cesar, sold to Real Zaragoza pre-season, or former skipper Fernando Hierro, who has moved to Qatar.

Spanish international Ivan Helguera and 23-year-old Francisco Pavon are now the only recognised centre backs aside from Ruben Gonzalez Rocha, who has just three top flight matches under his belt.

Raul Bravo played in the centre of defence in Saturday's narrow win over Betis but he is really a left back.

Queiroz, who joined the club after spending last season as assistant coach at Manchester United, said he would treat all his players alike and warned that the club as a whole could expect no favours from rivals.

"Just because we have the best players it doesn't mean we will win. We have to work hard," said the Portuguese coach.

Diouf ashamed

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool's El-Hadji Diouf on Thursday issued a public apology for the spitting incident which earned him a 5,000-pound (8,000-dollar) fine.

The Senegal international had pleaded guilty to assault under provocation by spitting on a Celtic fan Dominic Shivone during a UEFA Cup match on March 13 when he appeared before a Glasgow court earlier in the day.

"I want to say again how sorry I am for what happened at Celtic Park," said a statement released by Liverpool.

"But I hope people will understand

how shocked I was when I was struck on the back of the head.

"As was made clear in court, such an action in Senegal carries a very different and degrading meaning.

"My immediate reaction reflected what I took as a very deliberate provocation. It was wrong and is a mistake I'll not make again.

"I sincerely hope this incident will not affect the great relationship between the two clubs and their supporters and want to publicly wish Celtic and their fans all the best at home and in the Champions League this season.

"I've already been fined heavily by the club and respect the decision of the Glasgow court. I hope I can now draw a line under this whole business and get on with my job of playing football for Liverpool."

The incident happened when

FIXTURES



Saturday's fixtures in the Euro 2004 qualifying campaign (Kick-offs GMT):

- GROUP 1**
At Paris
 France v Cyprus (1845)
 At Ljubljana
 Slovenia v Israel (1815)
- GROUP 2**
At Zenica
 Bosnia and Herzegovina v Norway (1815)
 At Ploiesti
 Romania v Luxembourg (1630)
- GROUP 3**
At Rotterdam
 Netherlands v Austria (1830)
 At Minsk
 Belarus v Czech Republic (1530)
- GROUP 4**
At Riga
 Latvia v Poland (1830)
 At Gothenborg
 Sweden v San Marino (1400)
- GROUP 5**
At Glasgow
 Scotland v Faroe Isles (1400)
 At Reykjavik
 Iceland v Germany (1630)
- GROUP 6**
At Yerevan
 Armenia v Greece (1600)
 At Donetsk
 Ukraine v Northern Ireland (1615)
- GROUP 7**
At Vaduz
 Liechtenstein v Turkey (1800)
 At Skopje
 Macedonia v England (1630)
- GROUP 8**
At Sofia
 Bulgaria v Estonia (1500)
 At Andorra
 Andorra v Croatia (1400)
- GROUP 9**
At Milan
 Italy v Wales (1845)
 At Baku
 Azerbaijan v Finland (1500)
- Group 10**
At Dublin
 Republic of Ireland v Russia (1500)
 At Tbilisi
 Georgia v Albania (1600)

Beckham eases nerves



AFP, Skopje, Macedonia

England captain David Beckham said Friday he was confident he would be able to play in Saturday's Euro 2004 Group 7 qualifier against Macedonia.

Beckham told a press conference he expected to be 100 per cent fit after picking up a groin strain playing for Real Madrid on Tuesday.

"We'll see how it goes. Hopefully it'll go well," he said of a scheduled training session later in the day.

"You have to be 100 per cent fit to play in games at this level."

But he said the injury was not serious.

"I only tweaked the muscle."

Beckham is vital to England who have already lost Steven Gerrard, Paul Scholes, Trevor Sinclair and Rio Ferdinand through injury.

England coach Sven Goran Eriksson said they would need Beckham for what should be a challenging match.

"Doctors gave him treatment yesterday. He seems to be OK for training today and even better for tomorrow," the Swede said. "I know he's very keen to play for England."

"To have experienced players is always very good and David is one of those."

"It's a very difficult game. I've seen on tape all the games they've played so far. I was especially impressed with the game they played in Turkey. I think they could have won that game."

Turkey were fined 50,000 Swiss francs (32,000 euros, 37,000 dollars) for crowd trouble in that match in Istanbul after fans threw bottles and coins at Macedonia players when the visitors took a 2-1 lead.

World Cup semi-finalists Turkey twice came from behind before winning 3-2.

"We need to keep our heads very cool and play the football we know we can," Eriksson said of Saturday's match.

Macedonia, who held England 2-2 at Southampton, are looking to cause another upset under new coach Dragan Kanatlarovski although midfielders Goce Sedloski and Igor Jancevski are suspended, while defender Aleksandar Vasoski and striker Robert Popov are out injured.

But the two men who scored against England at Southampton, Artime Sakiri who curled a corner over goalkeeper David Seaman, and Vanko Trajanov, are both fit.

England are lying second in the group, two points behind Turkey, but have played one game less.

Only the group winners automatically qualify for next summer's finals in Portugal. Ten group runners-up go into a playoff.

Spending with a smile

Football

SUN, London

Claudio Ranieri has revealed that Roman Abramovich backed Chelsea's £118million summer transfer splurge with a smile on his face.

The Russian billionaire occasionally asked for an explanation before unzipping his wallet. But Ranieri insists Abramovich never once doubted his club manager's judgement.

If the Italian was convinced he had picked the right target, Abramovich happily coughed up.

Ranieri revealed: "Mr Abramovich asked me questions about certain players."

"I would reply that if I could get this particular player, he would be especially useful to the team because he could do this or that or something extra besides."

"For example, I explained to Mr Abramovich we needed a new striker with a particular set of characteristics as we didn't have that type of striker before."

"He is interested in this type of thing and seemed very happy with my explanations."

"He never once tried to change my mind about any of the players we have brought in. Never."

"The only thing he wanted to know above all was whether I was convinced in my own mind that this would be the right man to buy."

"He would say 'Are you sure?'. I would say 'Yes'. And that was it."

"I believe he is genuinely happy to have given me the players I wanted."

"But he will be even happier if we win something."

"I believe he has fallen in love with football and now he wants to know everything about it."

"He has asked me questions that show he is already very competent in his knowledge."

"So it would be wrong to suggest I am teaching and he is learning, because it isn't like that. Our conversations are just natural exchanges."

These "natural exchanges" have helped to make history in the football transfer market, as Ranieri tries to kill off any lingering rumours that

England coach Sven Goran Eriksson is the man really pulling the strings behind the scenes at Stamford Bridge.

And, despite the endless million-pound deals for current and future stars, Ranieri insists his life



ROMAN ABRAMOVICH

will not seem so very different now the transfer window has closed. He explained: "I was always able to concentrate on the football."

"Once I decided who we needed to buy, it was over to the club to try to get him."

"I was never involved in the financial negotiations and I must thank Chelsea for the truly professional way they went about their business."

"When you consider that all the new Chelsea players have already found homes, you start to understand just how quickly and efficiently the club has been working."

"It is important for players to feel peace of mind in their private lives, even if we in football are all citizens of the world and used to moving around."

"Yet I don't feel any relief that the transfer window has closed."

"It won't change my routine because I have been coaching out on the training ground through all of this."

"Admittedly, there won't be any more calls from cousins in Italy telling me who I'm supposed to have signed from over there."

"Otherwise, though, it will be the same and I'll still be concentrating on trying to win just like the players."



DRESSED FOR THE TRAVEL! England captain David Beckham walks towards the British Airways flight that would take his team to Skopje, Macedonia on September 4.

Jordi out of hospital

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Espanyol's Dutch striker Jordi Cruyff, formerly of Manchester United, left a Seville hospital on Thursday having received a blow to the head in their midweek 2-2 draw at Real Betis.

Team doctor Juan Carlos Gonzalez said a scan had shown nothing abnormal after Cruyff, son of former Barcelona coach

and Holland star Johan Cruyff, was involved in a clash of heads with Fernando Varela and had to come off after 75 minutes of Wednesday's Spanish league encounter.

Club sources said he would be back in training on Monday. Cruyff, 29, started out with Barca under his father before spending almost four seasons at Old Trafford though he struggled to hold down a first team place and moved to Alaves. He joined Espanyol in the summer.