

Ferdinand fiasco

Football

AFP, London

English football chiefs were considering Tuesday whether to charge Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand with failing to take a drugs test.

The 24-year-old Ferdinand, who became the world's most expensive defender when Manchester paid Leeds United 30 million pounds for him in 2002, could be banned for two years if found guilty.

The test is aimed at detecting cocaine and cannabis as well as performance-enhancing drugs.

The news forced England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson to delay naming his side for Saturday's crucial Euro 2004 qualifier against Turkey in Istanbul while Football Association lawyers attempted to clarify Ferdinand's legal position.

The disclosure comes a week after a number of English Premiership stars were accused of involvement in an alleged gang rape of a 17-year-old schoolgirl in an exclusive London hotel.

Manchester United in a statement confirmed Ferdinand had missed the test on September 23 but said he passed another examination 36 hours later.

"The player has not been charged with any offence, but has been asked to attend a personal interview on October 13 to explain the reasons behind his non-attendance," the club said.

"The player underwent a routine official FA drugs test 36 hours later on September 25 and this was negative."

The player was said to have "forgotten" to report for the drugs test.

Failure to take a drugs test is still a breach of FA and FIFA rules and subject to sanctions.

But Ferdinand's agent, Pini Zahavi, said his client was innocent of any offence.

"He was asked to take this test on a Sunday, but he could not because he was moving house."

"He did provide one four days later and it was negative, which is the most important thing. I cannot understand why this is happening. The FA are shooting themselves in the foot if they take the decision to ban him."

England need at least a draw against Turkey in Istanbul to

qualify for next year's European championship finals in Portugal and were already waiting to hear if Liverpool striker Michael Owen would be fit to play.

Eriksson was scheduled to name his side at 1200 GMT.

Ferdinand has a reputation as a party animal and was banned from driving for a year after celebrating his first England call-up as an 18-year-old and then attempting to drive home.

Ferdinand, involved in a number of widely-reported night club incidents, was transferred from West Ham to Leeds United for 18 million pounds in 2000.

It was hoped a move north would take him away from London's temptations but in 2001 he broke curfew before England's make-or-break World Cup qualifying match with Greece to visit strip clubs and bars in London with other players.

And in April this year a Leeds court heard how Ferdinand, appearing as a witness, had been on an extended drinking binge with Leeds defender Michael Duberry.

He was also banned from driving for speeding for six months in a separate case.



RIO FERDINAND

England do the expected

UEFA Euro 2004 PORTUGAL

AFP, London

England dropped Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand for Saturday's crucial Euro 2004 qualifier against Turkey because he failed to take a drugs test.

But Liverpool striker Michael Owen has overcome an ankle injury to make the squad for the match in Istanbul.

Captain David Beckham reported fit from weekend duty with Real Madrid and former Manchester team-mate Paul Scholes is back after missing the matches against Macedonia and Liechtenstein with a hernia problem.

England need at least a draw in Istanbul to qualify for next year's European championship finals in Portugal. If they lose they go into the play-offs.

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson drafted in former Arsenal defender Matthew Upson, now with Birmingham City, in Ferdinand's place in the squad.

But Chelsea's John Terry is expected to line up with Arsenal's Sol Campbell in central defence in Istanbul. The 24-year-old Ferdinand, who

became the world's most expensive defender when Manchester paid Leeds United 30 million pounds for him in 2002, faces an FA inquiry after failing to take a drugs test.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: David James (West Ham United), Paul Robinson (Leeds United), Ian Walker (Leicester City)

Defenders: Gary Neville (Manchester United), Phil Neville (Manchester United), Matthew Upson (Birmingham City), Sol Campbell (Arsenal), John Terry (Chelsea), Ashley Cole (Arsenal), Wayne Bridge (Chelsea), Danny Mills (Middlesbrough)

Midfielders: David Beckham (Real Madrid/SPA), Nicky Butt (Manchester United), Paul Scholes (Manchester United), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Owen Hargreaves (Bayern Munich/GER), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Kieron Dyer (Newcastle United), Joe Cole (Chelsea)

Strikers: Emile Heskey (Liverpool), Michael Owen (Liverpool), Wayne Rooney (Everton), James Beattie (Southampton)

Liverpool v Brazil in Bangkok!

AFP, Bangkok

Former Liverpool stars will take on Brazilian footballing veterans here next week as part of an Asian tour of golden oldies, organisers said Tuesday.

The Liverpool side will feature legends including Kenny Dalglish, Ian Rush and John Barnes, while Brazilian giants Flamengo will be headlined by Zico and Bebeto.

The two teams will play on Monday, after last taking each other on 22 years ago when the Brazilians beat the English 3-0 in the Toyota Cup in Tokyo.

Both teams will arrive in Thailand Saturday from Malaysia, where they will play the first match in their exhibition tour.

"This is an historic re-match between Liverpool and Flamengo who were both crowned as champions for Europe and South America during the 1980s," the organisers said in a statement.

Liverpool won the European Cup in the 1980-1981 season while Flamengo won the South American title in the same year.

A combined Liverpool and Flamengo side will also play a team of Thai seniors on Monday.

Three months ago the current Liverpool team played in Thailand, and local fans also enjoyed a visit by Spanish champions Real Madrid in August.



BRYAN ROBSON

Robson takes over Eagles

AFP, Abuja

Former England skipper Bryan Robson has been named Nigeria coach for next January's African Nations Cup in Tunisia.

"Robson was the most suitable of the four coaches that NFA officials discussed with while they were in England last week," a top official told AFP on Tuesday.

Robson will sign an initial six-month contract which will be renewed if he can produce results.

Robson, 46, has been out of a job since English Premiership side Middlesbrough let him go in June 2001.

The former Manchester United skipper played in three World Cups - 1982, 1986 and 1990.

This will be his first job in Africa and he will be assisted by Christian Chukwu, who has been Nigeria's caretaker coach since last year.

"He has accepted all our conditions and we are excited we have made the best choice," added the official.

Officials said bureaucratic bottlenecks have delayed the formal announcement as the NFA have to get approval from the sports ministry.

Nigeria are pitched against South Africa, Morocco and Benin in the first round of Tunisia 2004 kicking off January 24 in Tunis.

Nigeria have won the championship twice and on both occasions they were guided by foreigners, Otto Gloria of Brazil in 1980 and Dutchman Clemens Westerhof in 1994, when Chukwu was his deputy.

Jo Bonfrere from the Netherlands was the country's last foreign coach. He was fired in April 2001 after the Eagles lost 1-0 in Sierra Leone in a 2002 World Cup qualifying match.

Chukwu returned for his second spell as coach to the Green Eagles last year when Adegboye Onigbinde was sacked after the World Cup finals.

Kaka steals the limelight

Football

AFP, Rome

He may have only played a handful of games, but Kaka has already made an impact at AC Milan.

Signed from Sao Paolo in August, the 21-year-old Brazilian midfielder has adapted quickly to life in Serie A, forcing his way into the first team ahead of World Cup star Rivaldo.

"Never has a young player made such a sweet impact at the San Siro stadium," said Tuesday's La Gazzetta dello Sport, comparing Kaka's emergence with such Milan greats as Marco Van Basten.

On Sunday he gave another mature performance in the 3-1 win

'Rossoneri' fans, who have taken quickly to the new kid on the block.

The club's vice-president Adriano Galliani believes Kaka, tipped to follow in the footsteps of former San Siro legends such as Van Basten and Ruud Gullit, was made for Milan.

"Last summer everyone wanted David Beckham, but it is not in the genes of this club to have an Englishman here," he said.

"It is in our DNA to have a great number 10 playing behind two forwards and that's what Kaka is."

"He will become the best player in the world - I won't say anymore because I don't want to put too much pressure on him."

Kaka, whose full name is Ricardo Izecson Dos Santos Leite, is aware of the pitfalls of the professional game and is refusing to get carried

"All my dreams are coming true. I dreamt of playing in the Champions League and I was able to fulfill my wish, and then I started thinking about the derby and I scored in that."

Asked if he was surprised by how quickly the fans have warmed to him, Kaka replied: "They've been fantastic. I never thought I could win the affections of the public so soon."

Rivaldo performed a dramatic U-turn last month by deciding to stay with Milan until January, having initially decided to leave after failing to feature in the first few games of the season.

The unsettled 31-year-old, who despite having an excellent World Cup last year has never looked comfortable in Italy, may be on his way out of Milan, but Kaka still holds the utmost respect for his older compatriot.



KAKA

over derby rivals Inter Milan, prompting many of Milan's attacks and rounding off a silky display by scoring the second goal, his first for the European champions.

While a neglected Rivaldo watched from the stands, Kaka was lapping up the applause of the

away with his early success.

"There's no rush and I'm taking one step at a time," said the Brazil international, a member of the 2002 World Cup-winning squad.

"I just feel lucky to have made it this far, playing for a great team such as Milan."

"Rivaldo is a special person; he has given me a lot in the past and still continues to do so," he said.

"He knew how much it meant to me to have him by my side when I arrived here and has always encouraged me, on and off the pitch."

Moratti cautions Cuper

AFP, Rome

Inter president Massimo Moratti warned his coach Hector Cuper on Monday that he will not tolerate further performances like the one at the weekend in which his side were humbled by AC Milan.

Champions League holders Milan won Sunday's derby 3-1 to go joint top of Italy's Serie A, while Inter, five points adrift of their title rivals, dropped to sixth.

"In the first-half we competed well, but we didn't take the initiative and that's where we went wrong," Moratti said.

"Cuper is there to put things right and cut down on the errors. It's his task, like any other coach, to understand why the mistakes were made, but now it can't happen again."

Despite spending heavily in the summer on new players, Moratti has seen little return on his investment while neighbours Milan have gone from strength to strength.

Milan were crowned European champions and lifted the Italian Cup last year, while Inter finished runners-up in the league and were knocked out in the semi-finals of the Champion League - by their arch rivals.

Gunes no British fan

UEFA Euro 2004 PORTUGAL

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey coach Senol Gunes has hit out at the British media for fanning the flames ahead of Saturday's potentially explosive Euro 2004 qualifier with England.

And he claims there will be no trouble at the match which will decide who qualifies directly for next year's finals in Portugal.

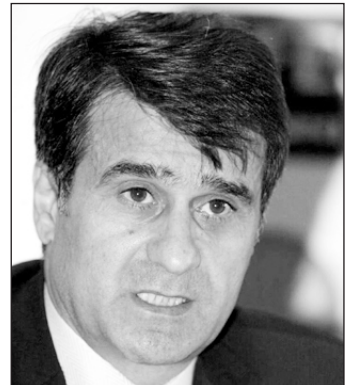
"A lot has been said first concerning security and then concerning injuries ahead of the match in a bid to shift the agenda. We should not fall for these games," Gunes told a press conference here.

"Let us not let the British media take control. Let us not follow what they are writing," he said.

Intense security measures will be in place for the match at the Sukru Saracoglu stadium in Istanbul's Asian corner to prevent a repeat of fighting that has marred encounters between the two countries in the past.

The most serious incident between the two sides came in April

2000, when two Leeds fans were stabbed to death in a street brawl in Istanbul ahead of a UEFA Cup tie between Galatasaray and Leeds United.



SENOLO GUNES

The English Football Association has not taken up any tickets for Saturday's match and has urged supporters to stay home.

Authorities have threatened to carry out airport checks on travellers in Britain and Turkey.

"There has been much talk about the security problem. There was tension first, but now it has gone

back to routine," Gunes said.

"I do not think there will any problems."

"We will show hospitality to the English outside the pitch, but on the pitch we will win," he added.

England go into their final group game with a one-point advantage over Turkey and will qualify if they avoid defeat.

But Gunes was confident his side would win.

"Our adversary is the leader of the group and they are a tough rival. But we will overcome this last obstacle on the way to Portugal," he said.

Turkey, third in last year's World Cup, have never beaten England and have drawn only once in nine matches since 1984.

They lost 2-0 at Sunderland in April when England's victory was tarnished by pre-match violence, two pitch invasions and the racist taunting of the Turkish fans by the home support.

England were fined a record 70,000 pounds (111,000 dollars) by UEFA after that match and have been warned further misbehaviour from their fans will result in them being thrown out of the Euro 2004 finals.

Irish revolution at MU?

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United were at the centre of fresh takeover rumours on Tuesday after it was confirmed that a pair of Irish racehorse tycoons had doubled their stake in the English Premiership champions.

John Paul "J.P." McManus and John Magnier, whose holding company was already the club's biggest single shareholder with an 11.4-percent stake, now owned 23.15 percent, Manchester United said in a statement to the London Stock Exchange.

The bulk of the extra shares were the 9.9 percent owned by British satellite broadcaster BSkyB, which BSkyB announced earlier Tuesday it had sold for around 62 million pounds (88 million euros, 103 million dollars).

McManus and Magnier, a pair of super-rich racehorse owners and enthusiasts, have long been friends with Manchester United team manager

Alex Ferguson, a fellow racing fan who is one of the most influential figures at the club.

The buy-up comes less than a week after Manchester United revealed that US tycoon Malcolm Glazer had doubled his stake in the club to 5.9 percent in less than a week.

News of the latest share buy-up sent United shares - which have already climbed strongly in recent weeks - up a further 5.8 percent to 248.75 pence in morning trade.

However it remained by no means clear what the Irish duo, who own their shares through a British Virgin Islands-registered investment firm Cubic Expression, plan to do with the increased stake.

"It's very difficult to know what their intentions are, and I'm sure the club will want to speak to them to find out," said Lee Darbyshire, editor of London-based Soccer Investor magazine, which covers the world of football finance.

"Part of me thinks that they could just be increasing their stake in case someone else attempts to make a bid,"

he said.

Takeover rumours have swirled around a series of English sides since Russian oil billionaire Roman Abramovich snapped up Premiership side Chelsea over the summer.

He took Chelsea back into private ownership, cleared their debts and then funded a vast, 111-million-pound spending spree on new players.

Last week United - generally reckoned to be the richest as well as possibly the most famous football club in the world - announced a 22-percent rise in annual profits to 39.3 million pounds.

Tuesday's news is further complicated by the fact that Ferguson's relationship with Magnier has reportedly soured recently due to a bitter dispute over Rock of Gibraltar, the hugely successful race horse he owns jointly with Magnier's wife.

Ferguson is reported to be considering legal action to get a 50-percent share of the horse's lucrative stud fees, to which he believes he is entitled.

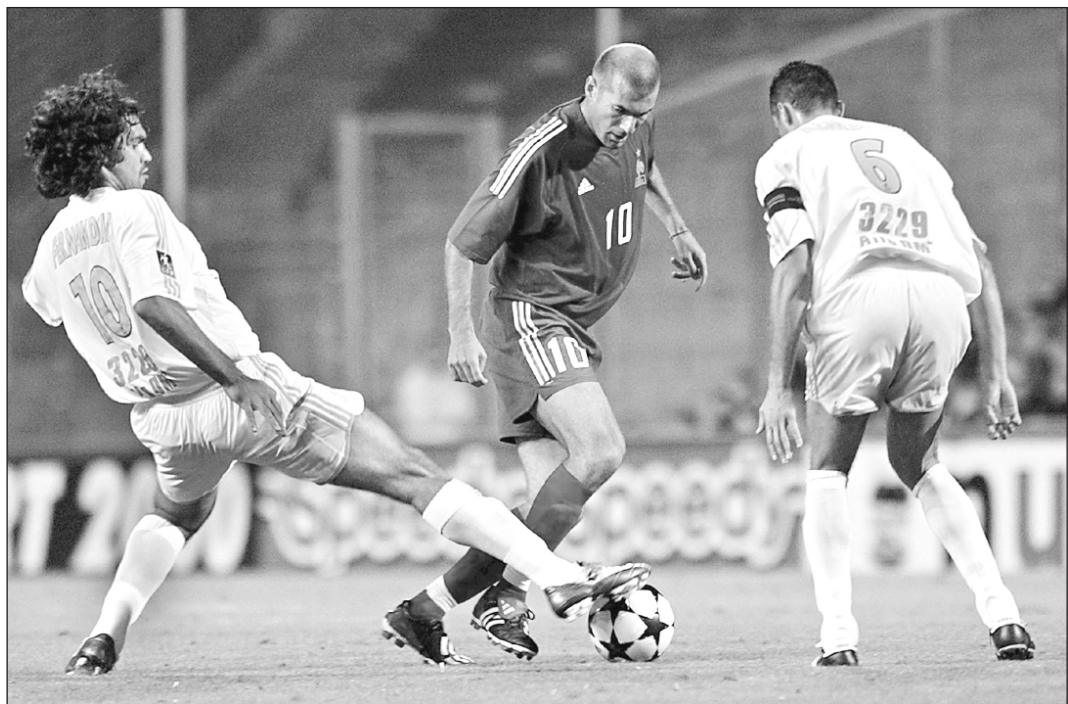


PHOTO: AFP

ZIDANE FOR HUMANITY: French superstar Zinedine Zidane (C) in action for the 1998 National team against Olympique Marseille on October 6 at the Velodrome stadium in Marseille. The game was organised by the Real Madrid ace, who is of Algerian origin, to express solidarity with Algerian earthquake victims and families of firemen who died this summer in this southern France region.