

Benfica enter Rivaldo race

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese giants Benfica have joined the chase to sign Brazil World Cup winner Rivaldo who was released by his Italian club AC Milan two weeks ago.

"I would never rule out the possibility of joining a club with such a world status as Benfica," the 31-year-old told the sports daily A Bola.

Benfica, who have won two European Cups and lost three other finals, are currently third in their league, six points behind leaders Porto.

A clutch of clubs are reported to be chasing Rivaldo who was set to announce where he will be playing next week.

A stumbling block could be his wages. He was reported to be on 215,000 euros (258,000 dollars) a week at Milan.

Rivaldo's agent Jorge Gama, says they have had three offers from English Premiership clubs and have already turned down an offer of one million dollars a month to play in Qatar.

The former FIFA World Player of the Year joined Milan from Barcelona after Brazil's World Cup triumph in Japan.

But Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti limited him to just 16 Serie A matches, and eight Champions League games last season, when he only made the bench in the Champions League final against Inter Milan.

This season has been even worse for Rivaldo, who has made only one substitute appearance in the Champions League, and has not played in Serie A.

But he has kept his place in the Brazil team, playing five internationals for the World Champions, including four World Cup qualifying matches.

Nesta to have knee surgery

AFP, Milan

AC Milan defender Alessandro Nesta went into hospital on Tuesday to have surgery on his injured left knee.

The 27-year-old Italy international, who travelled to Japan but did not play in Sunday's Intercontinental Cup final defeat to Boca Juniors, is expected to be out of action for a month.

That would rule him out of Milan's away trip to Serie A title rivals Roma on January 6.

Milan are currently second in the league, three points behind leaders Roma, but have played a game less.

League Cup Young Gunners in semis

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger succeeded where arch-rival Sir Alex Ferguson failed by overcoming West Brom with a second-string side to reach the last four of the League Cup.

Wenger's blend of youngsters and old heads like Kanu, Martin Keown and Lauren had sufficient quality to beat the first division leaders, who had eliminated a young Manchester United side in the last round.

Goals from Nigerian international Kanu and young French striker Jeremie Aladiere ensured the Premier League leaders stayed on track for a possible clean sweep of England's domestic silverware as well as remaining in the hunt for glory in the Champions League.



PHOTO: AP

FRIENDS FOR A CAUSE: Brazilian superstar Ronaldo (R) trying to outwit newly crowned FIFA World Player of the Year Zinedine Zidane during the charity match, "The Match Against Poverty," between the teams 'Ronaldo and Friends' and 'Zidane and Friends' at the St. Jakob Park Stadium in Basel, Switzerland on December 15.

A fight won against poverty

Football

AFP, Basel

Brazilian star Ronaldo gained some consolation for missing out to Real Madrid team-mate Zinedine Zidane on the world footballer of the year award by leading his team to a 4-3 victory over the Frenchman's here on Monday.

The two football greats led the teams in a match devoted to donating money to the United Nations battle against poverty and the packed house of 30,000 were well rewarded for turning up.

Zidane, who beat compatriot Thierry Henry and Ronaldo to the world footballer of the year award,

did not disappoint as he scored two of his side's three goals.

However it was Brazilians all the way after that as Luis Fabiano added a third for Zidane while Robinho scored two and Diego and Savio rounded off the scoring for Ronaldo's team.

The crowd was treated to some delightful skill and cunning tricks by the world-class ensemble. Ronaldo's team included Roberto Carlos and Rivaldo while Zidane's eleven featured Vitor Baia, Samuel Eto'o, David Beckham, Davor Suker and Murat Yakin.

Revenues from ticket sales and donations topped 1 million Swiss francs (approximately 650,000 Euro) with all proceeds earmarked for good causes.

The players were delighted at

the gala evening. "It was a very special match and a treat for the fans. It was great to meet up again with some good old friends, and the result is secondary in a game like this," Predrag Mijatovic commented. "Yes, it was very special indeed," added star referee Pierluigi Collina.

Murat Yakin joined in the chorus of praise: "It's always a privilege to play alongside superstars like this. We've seen the creme de la creme out here tonight, and it's been a super atmosphere."

"It's a marvellous project and it's been great meeting up with old friends," said a smiling Davor Suker. "A fine event and a brilliant crowd," Vitor Baia summed up concisely.

Chelsea's world record plan

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea chief executive Paul Smith said Wednesday they were ready to pay a world record 60 million pounds (85 million euros/105 million dollars) for Manchester United's Ruud van Nistelrooy.

The Dutch striker is currently renegotiating a new contract at Old Trafford but Smith, standing in until Peter Kenyon's move from Manchester is concluded, says Chelsea would be prepared to spend 100 million pounds on a single player.

Chelsea have already spent 111 million pounds since Russian oil billionaire Roman Abramovich bought them for 140 million pounds in July.

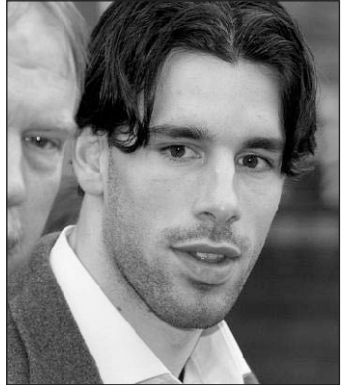
Smith said that a central defender and a midfielder are the club's main priorities in the new year.

Abramovich seems to have accepted that Arsenal striker Thierry Henry is not for sale, even for 50 million pounds, but Smith does not discount the possibility of the Blues setting a world transfer record if a player of the calibre of Henry or Ruud van Nistelrooy became available.

The world record is the 75 million pounds (90 million dollars) Real Madrid paid Juventus for Zinedine Zidane in 2001.

Van Nistelrooy, while insisting he loves life at Old Trafford, has refused to rule out a move to Real Madrid who last week said they would be keen to buy him next summer.

"If Pele was on the market today for 100 million then we'd maybe go for him, but we won't pay 30 million for Joe Nobody," Smith told



RUUD VAN NISTELROOY

the Evening Standard.

"If Ruud van Nistelrooy was priced at 60 million and we considered it a good investment, then we would probably pay that."

"It's not about the fee but about getting good value. We want the right quality and the right value."

His comments came on the same day that FIFA president Sepp Blatter condemned "billionaire

clubs" and warned that "if we are not careful, football may degenerate into a game of greed - a trend I will vigorously oppose".

Smith refused to pay over the odds for any player.

"We do care about the money and it's a misconception that we don't. There's not a finite budget but we want to get good value," he said.

"Roman is a businessman and is determined not to get ripped off. We won't pay the tourist price." Injuries to Emmanuel Petit and Juan Sebastian Veron, as well as the need for a fourth experienced centre-back, seems to be behind Chelsea's renewed interest in the transfer market.

"We're looking to strengthen the midfield as Frank Lampard and Claude Makelele are looking a bit tired," added Smith.

"If Emmanuel Petit and Juan Sebastian Veron were fit there wouldn't be a problem and we need to know when they'll be back."

"We also like Roberto Ayala and had a look at him but unfortunately he's cup-tied after playing in the UEFA Cup. We want players who are available for our Champions League campaign."

Ayala, an Argentine international, plays for Spanish side Valencia.

Zidane's reason to feel great

Football

REUTERS, Basel

Zinedine Zidane grinned with pleasure on Monday as he accepted his award as FIFA's World Player of 2003 - and said he was delighted to have taken the prize off his Real Madrid team-mate Ronaldo.

The Frenchman and the Brazilian are now level in the record books with three wins each in the 13-year-history of this prestigious prize, awarded this year in front of a television studio audience in an exhibition hall in Basel.

"This is a prize that is very special and it feels better every time you win it," said Zidane. "I am very happy to have won it this time and especially to have beaten my friend Ronaldo - especially as he is much younger than me."

"It doesn't matter how many times you win an award, it is always very special," Zidane said.

"And it is even more special when it is voted by the coaches. It is a major honour for me and I am very proud to have won it."

"It was certainly worth coming to Basel and it gave me a chance to hear Ronaldo say that I deserved the award, while I consider him to be a phenomenon."

Zidane is 31 and Ronaldo, who came third, only 27, while the man who finished as runner-up to 'Zizou' this year, Thierry Henry of France and Arsenal, is 26.

"He is a fantastic player and he will do great things in future," said Zidane, of the highly-rated Henry.

Ronaldo, who starred in Brazil's World Cup winning team last year and won the award for the third time when it was awarded to him in Madrid, said: "I am happy to be here - but third is not the same as first, is it? I would prefer to have won it, but I am happy for Zidane."

Zidane has now won the FIFA World Player award three times in six years. He has lifted the prize in 1998, following France's World Cup triumph, in 2000, after they won the European Championship, and again in 2003.

Ronaldo won the award in 1996, 1997 and 2002.

Henry was widely favoured to win and become the first player from an English club to lift the award since it was inaugurated in 1991 when Germany's Lothar Matthaus was the first winner.

He picked up 186 points from the votes of the 142 national team coaches, 21 picking him in first place, and 22 in second, while Zidane had 35 coaches votes in first place and 27 in second. Ronaldo

was given 26 first-place votes, but only 11 for second.

The points system was five for first place, three for second and one for third and in the final totals Zidane had 264, Henry had 186 and Ronaldo 176.

Asked if he felt disappointed, Henry said: "Yes and no -- I am proud to be here and be with these great players and that is very good. Of course, I thought about winning, beforehand, but now I have decided this is just the beginning and I will be back."

Henry, for whom Arsenal rejected a reported offer of 50 million pounds last week from Chelsea and in whom Real Madrid president Florentino Perez has expressed strong interest, said he

Trapattoni voted for Roberto Carlos and Spain's Ignacio Saez Ruez voted for Zidane.

Nedved of the Czech Republic and Juventus was fourth with 158 points and Roberto Carlos of Brazil and Real Madrid fifth with 105.

Van Nistelrooy of Manchester United and the Netherlands was sixth and David Beckham of Real Madrid and England was seventh ahead of his club-mate Spaniard Raul and Italian Paolo Maldini who captained AC Milan to their European Cup triumph this year.

The winner of the FIFA women's world player of the year was Birgit Prinz of Germany, top scorer for the World Cup winning German team in the United States.

POINTS

The result of the vote for FIFA World Player of the Year Based on vote of 142 national team coaches

Tabulate under: total points, first place votes, second place votes and third place votes

1. Zinedine Zidane (FRA/Real Madrid) 264 pts (35-27-08)
2. Thierry Henry (FRA/Arsenal) 186(21-22-15)
3. Ronaldo (BRA/Real Madrid) 176(26-11-13)
4. Pavel Nedved (CZE/Juventus) 158(14-25-13)
5. Roberto Carlos (BRA/Real Madrid) 105(14-09-08)
6. Ruud Van Nistelrooy (NED/Man Utd) 86(04-17-15)
7. David Beckham (ENG/Real Madrid) 74(08-07-13)
8. Raul (SPA/Real Madrid) 39(08-03-10)
9. Paolo Maldini (ITA/Milan) 37(05-03-03)
10. Andrei Shevchenko (UKR/AC Milan) 26(02-03-07)

PAST WINNERS

Past winners of the FIFA Player of the Year award:-

- 2003: Zinedine Zidane (FRA/Real Madrid)
- 2002: Ronaldo (BRA/Real Madrid)
- 2001: Luis Figo (POR/Real Madrid)
- 2000: Zinedine Zidane (FRA/Juventus)
- 1999: Rivaldo (BRA/Barcelona)
- 1998: Zinedine Zidane (FRA/Juventus)
- 1997: Ronaldo (BRA/Inter Milan)
- 1996: Ronaldo (BRA/Barcelona)
- 1995: George Weah (LBR/AC Milan)
- 1994: Romario (BRA/Barcelona)
- 1993: Roberto Baggio (ITA/Juventus)
- 1992: Marco van Basten (NED/AC Milan)
- 1991: Lothar Matthaus (GER/Bayern Munich)

2003'S BEST

List of FIFA award winners for 2003, announced by soccer's world governing body here on Monday:

- Men's Player of the year:** Zinedine Zidane (FRA)
- Women's Player of the year:** Birgit Prinz (GER)
- Team of the year:** Brazil
- Most improved team in FIFA world standings:** Bahrain
- Fair Play award:** Glasgow Celtic supporters
- Special FIFA president's award:** Iraqi football community

was very happy to stay with Arsenal "for as long as they want me."

In the voting details released by FIFA, it was revealed that Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira voted for Van Nistelrooy, England's Sven-Goran Eriksson voted for Roberto Carlos, France's Jacques Santini voted for Paolo Maldini, Germany's Rudi Voeller voted for Pavel Nedved, Italy's Giovanni

In the remaining awards, Brazil won the FIFA/Coca Cola world ranking top team for 2003.

Bahrain won world ranking best mover, Celtic's supporters won the FIFA Fair Play award for their exemplary behaviour at the UEFA Cup final in Sevilla and the Iraqi football community won the FIFA Presidential Award.

Ferdinand's date with destiny

Football

AFP, Bolton

Rio Ferdinand's chances of playing for England in next year's Euro 2004 finals will be hanging in the balance here on Thursday when he appears before a disciplinary hearing to answer charges of missing a doping test.

Nearly three months after the alleged offence, Ferdinand finally gets his chance to explain how he came to leave his club Manchester United's training ground on September 23 when UK Sport's doping control officers were waiting for him to provide a urine sample for a routine test.

The hearing is scheduled to run into Friday. But while any sanctions are expected to be announced at the end of the hearing, that is by no means guaranteed to be the end of the affair.

Any punishment announced by the FA will be subject to appeal and it is almost certain that the squadron of lawyers United have employed to defend their player will contest anything beyond a short, symbolic ban.

But United have not been alone in applying pressure over the case. FIFA supremo Sepp Blatter, infuriated by the length of time it has taken for the FA to get within sight of a decision, has suggested he could intervene if he deems the eventual outcome too lenient.

A suspension of three months is the outcome most pundits have been predicting.

That would ensure Ferdinand, who has been suspended from playing for England since the affair became public but has continued to play for United, is back in action by the end of March, in time to ensure he is ready to represent England at Euro 2004 in June.

But there is little in the way of jurisprudence to provide guidance as to how the panel will balance the conflicting pressures it faces.

The defender has been formally charged with misconduct under anti-doping regulations governing "the failure or refusal by a player to submit to drug testing as required by a competent official."

In theory, Ferdinand could be banned for up to two years and there is little doubt that, if he were a swimmer or a runner, that is the kind of punishment he would be looking at.

Under the International Olympic Committee's 'strict liability rule', forgetting to attend a test offers no defence against punishment.

The FA has admitted however that its own regulations do not cover such a scenario and United's lawyers will inevitably highlight a case last season in which Manchester City player Christian Ngouami missed a drugs test and escaped with a 2,000-pound fine.

Ngouami, who spoke little

English at the time, convinced a disciplinary panel that he had genuinely failed to understand that he was supposed to provide a sample.

Ferdinand, 25, maintains that he has never used performance enhancing or recreational drugs and insists he simply forgot about



RIO FERDINAND

the test.

A test which he took within 36 hours of the one he missed proved negative although that is unlikely to have much bearing on the final outcome.

The delay would have been long enough to allow a number of banned substances to be eliminated from the body.

According to leaked details of the argument Ferdinand's lawyers

will present on Thursday, Ferdinand realised his mistake while shopping in central Manchester shortly after the training session.

He then reportedly phoned United doctors who were with the doping control officers and told them he would return to the training ground. It is claimed the officers left the training ground 25 minutes after the phone call.

As well as trying to establish that Ferdinand was not given a reasonable opportunity to take the test, his lawyers will present glowing character references from United boss Sir Alex Ferguson and Sven-Goran Eriksson.

The FA panel will also have to take into account the fact that Ferdinand has already suffered a degree of punishment as his result of his suspension from international duty, which meant he missed England's final Euro 2004 qualifier against Turkey in Istanbul last month.

His exclusion from the squad enraged his international teammates, who briefly threatened to boycott the Turkey match over what they saw as conviction without trial.

The players' stance was widely ridiculed but Gordon Taylor, the head of the English players' union, has continued to insist that Ferdinand's chances of a fair hearing have been fatally compromised by the hullabaloo surrounding the case.

Scaloni threatens Becks

Football

AP, Madrid

Argentine midfielder Lionel Scaloni suggested he will be looking for revenge on David Beckham when Deportivo de La Coruna next plays Real Madrid.

Sparks flew between Beckham and Scaloni during the final minutes of Madrid's 2-1 league win at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium on Sunday as the Deportivo midfielder reacted furiously to a foul by the English star.

"There is always a chance of revenge in soccer and we will see each other again on a soccer pitch, which is where things are decided," Scaloni was quoted as saying in Tuesday's edition of the sports daily AS. "I will be waiting for him at our Riazor stadium for the next game."

That match is scheduled for May 2, five weeks before Beckham captains England in the Euro 2004 tournament in Portugal, although Deportivo and Madrid could also meet beforehand in the Champions League or Copa del Rey.

"He fouled me from behind, we both fell over and threw out a couple of kicks and after that he made a gesture that I didn't like at all," Scaloni said.

Beckham offered to shake hands

after the clash but Scaloni turned him down, saying it would have been insincere to do so.

"The referee asked us to shake hands, but I didn't want to. It didn't seem right as we wanted to kill each other 10 seconds earlier," Scaloni said. "It seemed false to offer him my hand because we couldn't stand the sight of each other."

Scaloni continued to confront Beckham after the final whistle, mouthing insults at the Madrid midfielder before being separated by other players.

Scaloni, 25, joined Deportivo in 1997 after playing in Argentina with Estudiantes and Newell's Old Boys.

It is the third time that Beckham has fallen foul of an Argentine midfielder in his career.

The first came in the 1998 World Cup tournament in France when he clashed with midfielder Diego Simeone and was ejected. Beckham was subsequently pilloried by the British press and many English supporters, who blamed him for England's elimination.

In April 2002, Aldo Duscher -- an opponent of Beckham's in last Sunday's game -- broke a bone in the star midfielder's foot in Deportivo's Champions League game with Manchester United and almost caused him to miss last year's World Cup finals.

Brazil oust Argentina to enter semis



AP, Abu Dhabi

Brazil and Spain won semifinals Monday and will play for the title of soccer's World Youth Championship.

Brazil beat defending champion Argentina 1-0 on a 65th-minute header by Dudu in a game between South American rivals. Spain downed Colombia 1-0 on a penalty kick by Iniesta in the 86th minute.

The championship game is Friday. Colombia will play Argentina for third place.

The Brazilians are three-time winners of this tournament and their regular national team has won the World Cup five times. Argentina, which defeated the United States in the quarterfinals, has won the youth championship four times.



PHOTO: AP

DUDU DOES IT! Brazil striker Dudu is euphoric as he celebrates his winning goals against archrivals Argentina in the semifinals of the FIFA World U20 Soccer Championship at Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on December 15.