

Beautiful game in danger

REUTERS, Brussels

Europe's politicians and football authorities must act quickly to stop the game falling into the wrong hands, an independent report said on Tuesday.

Published ahead of the World Cup finals starting on June 9, the report into how the game should be run in the European Union said the public was becoming increasingly disaffected with the "beautiful game".

The report recommended a cap on players' wages, stricter rules for players' agents and putting the game on a more secure legal footing.

"The result of the review has left me deeply concerned. Sports and football in particular are not in good health," said Jose Luis Arnaot, the man who led the inquiry.

"There is a real risk that the ownership of clubs will pass into the wrong hands and the true values of sport will be eroded."

The review was launched in December under the British presidency of the EU. It is sponsored by the EU and UEFA, European soccer's ruling body, with the blessing of football's world governing body FIFA.

Arnaot, the former Portuguese deputy prime minister, delivered his report on Tuesday to British Prime Minister Tony Blair and President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso.

EU ministers will discuss the findings at a meeting in Brussels next month.

Ruud fancies leaving United

AFP, Lusanne

Dutch international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy said on Monday that it might be better if he were to leave English Premiership giants Manchester United after falling out with manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

The 29-year-old, scorer of 150 goals in 200 starts for United since joining in a 19-million-pound transfer from PSV Eindhoven five years ago, had a stand up row with Ferguson at a training session shortly before their last match of the season and was sent home.

While van Nistelrooy said he didn't want to make any decisions about his future till after the World Cup -- which runs from June 9 to July 9 in Germany -- he hinted that he would prefer to leave.

"Am I going to leave or stay at Manchester United? Anything is possible... but perhaps it is best that I leave," said van Nistelrooy, who was speaking at the Dutch training camp.

"However on the other hand I still have two years left on my contract."

"I will deal with all that after the World Cup. For the moment I am focussing solely on the team here and my agent knows not to disturb me with stories about possible transfers."

Van Nistelrooy's bust-up with Ferguson -- who has previously seen other United icons like David Beckham and Roy Keane leave after their relations soured -- has alerted several top clubs including Serie A's Inter Milan, Spanish outfit Atletico Madrid and two Premiership teams, Spurs and Newcastle.

Rui Costa set for Benfica move

AFP, Lisbon

AC Milan's Portuguese midfielder Rui Costa, who has one year left with the Italian side, is set to return to Lisbon-based Benfica, Portugal's sports media reported Tuesday.

The 34-year-old has terminated his contract with AC Milan and the Portuguese giants have offered him a one-year deal with the option of an extension for another year, sports daily Record reported citing unnamed club officials.

"For now nothing has been finalized," Costa told reporters as he arrived in Lisbon ahead of the European Under-21 Championship match between Portugal and France which he will attend later on Tuesday in the northern city of Braga.

"I believe that over the coming days I may have news for you. I am very pleased to be welcomed by fans, to see that Benfica players are happy about the possibility of my return," he added.

Costa joined Fiorentina from Benfica in 1994 after three seasons with the Lisbon team. He signed a five-year contract with AC Milan in July 2001 in a deal worth 33 million euros (40 million dollars) which he later extended until 2007.

The player, who has for years said he would like to end his career at Benfica, retired from international football in July 2004 after the end of the European football finals in which hosts Portugal finished in second place.



South Korea's Kim Do-Heon (L) vies for the ball with Senegal's Papa Malick Ba during their pre-World Cup warm-up match in Seoul on Tuesday.

South Korea held by Senegal



AFP, Seoul

World Cup finalists South Korea were held to a 1-1 draw here Tuesday by Senegal, the gifted African side who failed to qualify for the finals starting next month in Germany.

South Korea coach Dick Advocaat had scheduled the friendly game against the Senegalese to give his squad a taste of what they are likely to encounter on June 13 in Frankfurt when they open their World Cup account against another African side, Togo.

The South Koreans are in World

Cup Group G which also includes 1998 champions France and Switzerland.

Advocaat and his coaching staff believe that a victory against Togo is vital for qualifying for the second round of the tournament and on Tuesday's form here, that result looked far from assured.

Senegal opened stronger than the tentative Koreans in an evenly-matched first half, but neither side carved out convincing chances. After the break when Korea raised their game, the Africans had enough left to respond.

After piling on the pressure, the home side went ahead with a shot from defender Kim Do-Heon after 74 minutes and the match looked all but sewn up.

But Senegal came back with an equally impressive strike in the 80th minute from midfielder Moussa

Ndiaye, silencing a vocal home crowd of over 60,000.

Ahn Jung-Hwan, the star striker from the 2002 World Cup side when South Korea reached the last four, had the ball in the net in the 50th minute after Lee Chun-Soo freed him in front of goal but he was ruled offside.

Lee, also a 2002 veteran, had his own chance minutes later but fired wide.

Another South Korean attack ended when defender Kim Dong-Jin forced Senegal goalkeeper Pape Mamadou Diouf to touch a stinging shot just over the bar.

Senegal, who beat Norway in their last match on March 1, showed flashes of the creative talent they displayed in the World Cup four years ago when they reached the quarter-finals after beating France in the first round.

It's Brazil to win -- or is it?

GUARDIANONLINE

Academics have pored over the form books, analysed the results of 4,500 international matches, ranked teams according to their attacking and defensive capabilities -- and come up with the not so startling conclusion that Brazil are the most likely winners of the World Cup.

With the tournament likely to be the biggest betting event of all time, the prediction from the Decision Technology Group at Warwick University is unlikely to have bookmakers quaking in their shoes. Brazil are already firm favourites, with Ladbrokes quoting 9-4 yesterday, ahead of England and Germany both at 7-1.

The group's calculations suggest Brazil have a 13.1% chance of victory in Berlin's Olympic Stadium on July 9, while England are ninth most likely to succeed with a 5% chance.

France, Germany, Holland, Spain, the Czech Republic, Portugal and Italy are all rated more likely winners.

The Warwick group has also calculated that England have a 79.7% chance of emerging as one of the two qualifiers from Group B, which includes Sweden, Paraguay and Trinidad and Tobago.

If England do make it to the final, the academics foresee a quarterfinal against either Portugal or Holland, followed by a semifinal against Brazil or Spain.

Players stand by Lippi

INTERNET, undated

Luca Toni and Daniele De Rossi are delighted that the Italian Football Federation have backed boss Marcello Lippi.

The tactician was given a vote of confidence by FIGC commissioner Guido Rossi on Monday despite being embroiled in the telephone interception scandal.

And both Azzurri stars have breathed a huge sigh of relief after the Coach was confirmed in his place for Germany 2006.

"We are all with our Coach, starting from me," said the Fiorentina striker. "He brought me into the national side and I owe him a lot."

"Lippi has proven himself to be a good and prepared tactician and I don't see any reason why there should be a problem with him being here."

"He's done very well up to this point and it is only right that he is the one who leads us in Germany," added Toni.

"The strength of this group is the team spirit that we have and that was transmitted to the players by Lippi himself."

Some sections of the media at the weekend had called for the former Juventus man to quit, with Giovanni Trapattoni, Claudio Gentile and Carlo Ancelotti all suggested as possible emergency appointments for the World Cup.

However, Roma midfielder De Rossi insists that he didn't think that the Azzurri would have to deal with such a situation.

"I never thought that there was a possibility that Lippi would quit," said the former Under-21 international.

"To change now would have been a damaging factor. It was pleasing that Guido Rossi stood by Lippi's side."

One of the main allegations hanging over Lippi at the moment is the claim that he was pressured into selecting certain players by former Juve director general Luciano Moggi.

The tactician himself again denied that suggestion yesterday and De Rossi doesn't doubt him for a minute.

"There are no players in this squad sent by others," he noted. "I think that those here deserve it."

Berlusconi set for Milan presidency

AFP, Rome

Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is to regain the presidency of Italian giants AC Milan he announced on Monday.

Berlusconi gave up the presidency of Milan in 2001 when he took over governing the country so as to avoid a conflict of interests but now he says that does not exist having narrowly lost the recent general election to Romano Prodi and his centre-left coalition.

"In a few days time we will have a new president of AC Milan, myself," the irrepressible former cruise liner crooner said on Italian television.

"The question over a conflict of interests does not exist anymore because I am no longer Prime Minister."

"Until recently I was responsible for governing the country, but now I am leader of the opposition and future president of AC Milan."

The club is presently being run by the vice-president, Adriano Galliani, who is also president of professional league clubs.

Zidane screened at Cannes

Football

AFP, Cannes

As World Cup fever mounts around the world, Cannes critics Monday got to see French player Zinedine Zidane as he's never been seen before: in a 'documentary' portrait of the Real Madrid star which trained 17 cameras on him during a match.

The French production, titled "Zidane: A Portrait of the 21st Century", capitalises on the immense popularity of the player in France, across much of Europe and in north Africa, by showing him during a game between his side and Villarreal in the Spanish championship at the end of last season.

"From the beginning, we thought of him and nobody else. If he'd told us 'no', the project would have fallen apart then and there," one of the two filmmakers, Philippe Parreno, told the Inrockuptibles magazine recently.

His partner, Douglas Gordon, said they decided to make the film because there was something in Zidane "that is intriguing, that

nobody else has... he makes you think of a Sergio Leone hero, a sort of Man Without a Name."

Visually, the parallel between an impassive Spaghetti Western lead and the player is marked: Zidane's face barely changes expression even when goals are scored or after he is sent off the field at the end.

The musical score, instead, fills out the subtext of the moments, giving a rhythm to the movie that is punctuated by the harsh, aggressive cacophony from the crowd in the stadium that was added in post-production.

Sub-titles showing what Zidane -- who came out of the Cannes football team youth system -- was thinking at certain moments provide a narration.

The homage to the man, a tall, square-jawed figure with a bald patch giving him a vulnerable aspect matched by his calm eyes, provides moments in which the viewer feels alone with him, studying him in a sort of hagiographic intimacy.

Close-ups are also cross-cut with the televised images of the match to show the contrast of the

brutality on the pitch with the remote pictures seen by viewers.

But those hoping the documentary might give some insights into the player will be disappointed; the filmmakers said that was not their aim.

An approach which risks vexing fans of Zidane's talent, his elegance and technique on the grass and want a glimpse of what makes him tick.

The style of the documentary, zeroing in on Zidane's eyes, his face, or his legs, also rob the picture of a sense of space, revealing little of what is happening around him to react to and even in which direction the game's action is taking place.

Cannes then would seem to be the ideal venue for the film's screening, putting it in the same company as other movies that concentrate on the art of cinema at the expense of accessibility.

With the result that it is in fact less of a documentary than an aesthetic vision of an athlete in motion -- a monument to kinetics more than a real portrait.



French legend Zinedine Zidane seen attending a training session on Tuesday in Tignes, French Alps.

King Hicham bids adieu

Athletics

AFP, Casablanca

Moroccan athletics legend Hicham El Guerrouj announced his retirement from the sport here on Monday admitting that he would sleep easy over his decision.

The 31-year-old won double Olympic gold at the Athens Olympics in 2004 -- taking the 1500metres and the 5000m -- and is the world record holder for the 1500 metres, mile and 2000m outdoors and 1500m and mile indoors.

The four-time world outdoor 1500m champion had barely raced since the Olympics said it had been a difficult decision to take.

"This moment when I announce my official retirement is historic and difficult," said El Guerrouj.

"I would like to thank all those who have helped me throughout my career."

"I am officially ending my 19 year career where we have lived you (the Moroccans) and me some really happy times."

"I thank my family, my wife, my

daughter and the King.

"My tears today (Monday) are tears of joy and not of sadness. I will return to another world whose horizons I do not know."

However despite his claims they were tears of joy he had to stop abruptly saying 'I cannot find the words'.

However he managed to gather himself and reveal how he came to reach his decision.

"I took the decision to retire because I suddenly began to sleep well three weeks ago," said El Guerrouj, who revealed that since winning double gold in Athens he had not slept at all well and has seen him not race since.

"During this period I was in a state of flux, I just did not know whether I should run or stop, now it is done, I am relieved."

In the immediate future El Guerrouj said he would like to help young Moroccan athletes develop and try and reach his heady heights.

"I would like to pass on all that I learnt during my career."

"It is important that the young Moroccan athletes believe that anything is possible. Sport is always a source of hope."

Adriano focused on Brazil

INTERNET, undated

Brazilian striker Adriano is fully focused on the World Cup, despite reports Real Madrid are to make a bid for him.

The 24-year-old Internazionale man has had problems in Italy this year, but has pledged his allegiance to the club.

Reports in Italy, however, suggest the world's richest club are to offer around 30 million euros and hit-man Ronaldo to secure the young international.

The player himself is also reported to be offered 9 million euros in personal terms.

"Now Adriano is thinking only of his national team and to the World Cup that is closer," Adriano's agent Gilmar Rinaldi said.

Real were the Primera Liga's second top scorers behind champions Barcelona, but with Zinedine Zidane's retirement and Ronaldo's seemingly imminent exit from the Bernabeu the hunt for a new marksman is on.

The world will have to wait until after the showpiece in Germany to find out which country Adriano will be plying his trade in next season.

Smolarek to complete family double



REUTERS, Warsaw

Euzebiusz Smolarek heads for the World Cup finals seeking to emerge from the shadow of his father Wlodzimierz, a hero of the Polish side which took third place in Spain in 1982.

Euzebiusz, 24, grew up in the Netherlands and still struggles in Polish, but is now seen as a key attacking weapon for the Poles after netting regularly for Borussia Dortmund and the national team

this season.

"Ebi" is chasing his father's record of 13 goals in 60 games between 1980 and 1992, including strikes in both the 1982 and 1986 World Cup finals. By the end of April he had the first three in the bag.

"Once you've played twice in the finals, we can start talking," the older Smolarek told his son during a recent interview with national daily Gazeta Wyborcza.

Ebi began his football education under his father, but as players the pair are chalk and cheese, a fact underlined by a run of injury problems which kept him out of the last World Cup in 2002.

"The father was tough as nails --

physically and psychologically," says Wyborcza football columnist Dariusz Wolowski. "The son is more delicate, but better-schooled technically. He has been shaped as a footballer in Holland."

Nerveless finishing, quick feet and a good turn of pace have made the whip-thin Smolarek one of the sharpest finishers in the Bundesliga since he moved from Feyenoord to Borussia Dortmund last year.

For Poland he is likely to start on the right of a four-man midfield, looking to beat opponents and form a dangerous strike partnership with Celtic's Maciej Zurawski.

Germans too soft for sport?

REUTERS, Berlin

Jan Ullrich, who won the Tour de France in 1997, and former world champion swimmer Franziska van Almsick say Germany's younger generation of athletes lack the courage and commitment to succeed in sport.

In an interview with German magazine Max, Ullrich and van Almsick said young German athletes lacked the drive of their generation and that the comforts of a prosperous society had blunted their competitive spirit.

"They go to play soccer but the first time they get kicked in the shins, they quit," said van Almsick, who won 10 Olympic

silver and bronze medals between 1992 and 2004. She also holds the 200 metres freestyle record.

"That's part of sport, fighting back through setbacks," added van Almsick, 28, who retired in 2004. "But today's generation is an easy-going generation. No one sticks with it anymore."

She added that to become part of the elite in sport, athletes had to push through the pain barrier and that younger Germans lack the courage to do that.

Both van Almsick, born in East Berlin, and Ullrich, from Rostock, grew up in Communist East Germany, a country that used sport as a political tool and

devoted enormous resources to finding and fostering young talent.

Ullrich, who won the Tour de France in 1997 and finished second five times, said Germany's younger generation could not handle the pain athletes had to suffer to be successful.

"We're always playing down our pain," said the 32-year-old, who also won a gold and silver medal at the 2000 Olympics.

"Those who judge me have no idea how much pain we go through every day. They would scream for three years non-stop if they only got a feel just once for the pain we endure every day."

Czech Rosicky joins Arsenal

Football

AFP, Dortmund

Czech Republic international Tomas Rosicky has joined Arsenal from Borussia Dortmund, the London club said on Tuesday.

Though neither the fee nor the length of contract were given, the Champions League finalists were reportedly set to pay seven million pounds (10.2 million euros) to capture the 25-year-old Rosicky ahead of next month's World Cup finals.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said: "We are delighted to welcome Tomas to our squad. He has great technique, skill on the ball and sharp passing."

"Tomas has good experience at all levels for club and country, and we look forward to welcoming him to

Arsenal after what will hopefully be a successful summer for him at the World Cup."

Rosicky said: "I'm really happy to



TOMAS ROSICKY

be here at Arsenal, it is a great day for me. The team showed its

strength recently in the Champions League and it has big potential with a lot of young players."

Dortmund have acute financial problems after gambling on playing in the Champions League and the sale of Rosicky would be a welcome cash injection for the club.

Rosicky joined Dortmund from Sparta Prague for a then club record of 12.7 million euros (8.6 million pounds) in January 2001 and helped the club to the domestic title in 2002.

But Dortmund financial problems soon came to light and for the past two seasons Rosicky, contracted until June 2008, has been angling for a move from Germany.

Spanish side Atletico Madrid came close to signing Rosicky last summer but failed to match Dortmund's valuation for the player.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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Solution time: 25 mins.

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