French players led by Franck Ribery (top) participate in a mountain trekking session as part of their training in the city of Tignes in the Swiss Alps on

Gang behind **Vieira** burglary

AFP, Paris

A pan-European car-jacking gang is believed to be behind a weekend burglary at the Riviera home of Juventus midfielder Patrick Vieira, who was knocked out with gas during the raid, police said.

Six eastern Europeans, including a woman and the two suspected gang leaders, were taken into custody Wednesday after they were caught red-handed stealing a luxury car from a villa in the Riviera town of Biot, police said

The gang is suspected of breaking into Vieira's villa near Cannes Saturday night, making off with jewellery and the player's Mercedes

Vieira and his wife Cheryl complained of violent headaches the following morning, suggesting the gang had pumped sleeping gas into their home

The couple were unharmed in the incident, and Vieira was able to join the rest of the French football team in the Alpine resort of Tignes on Simday, where they are following an intensive World Cup training

Vieira's car was recovered in Nice on Monday, and Le Parisien newspaper said police had discovered a garage lined with luxury Mercedes, Audi and Nissan vehicles, allegedly intended for re-sale

in eastern Europe. Police said the network -- which had been under watch for several weeks -- was suspected of a string of similar cases, including three on

the Riviera The stolen cars were left at dropoff points, where they were picked up and trafficked abroad -- mostly to

Slovenia via Italy, police said. French police said that carjacking by organised criminals was a major new problem on the Riviera.

with the number of cases rising "exponentially".

Pires moves to Villarreal

AFP, London

Robert Pires is leaving Champions League finalists Arsenal for a twoyear deal with Spanish side Villarreal, the French winger confirmed Thursday.

"After six wonderful years at Arsenal, full of fantastic moments, I have decided to accept a new challenge at Villarreal for the next two years of my career," the 32vear-old said on the English Premiership side's website.

"I am very grateful to Arsene Wenger, the players and all the fans for their amazing support over the years," he added.

Pires has been consistently linked to the Yellow Submarines, who were knocked out by Arsenal in the Champions League semi-finals and finished seventh in the Primera Liga.

Gunners boss Wenger said of his compatriot: "Robert has had six tremendous years with us and made a huge contribution to the teams success during his time here

"He is not only a great footballer but a good man, so of course, we are sad to see him go. It's difficult to pick out one or two highlights but he was superb in our double winning season during the 2001/02 campaign and contributed hugely to our unheaten season with 19 goals.

"I would like to thank Robert for the dedication, determination and passion he has shown and wish him well in his career."

Pires made 284 appearances for Arsenal in all competitions during his six seasons at Highbury, scoring

84 goals. But he missed out on the 2006 French World Cup squad, having fallen out with coach Raymond Domenech

France aim to bury ghosts of 2002



As sporting disasters go they don't come much bigger than France's misadventure in Asia at the 2002

World Cup. The defending champions, under the stewardship of Roger Lemerre, travelled to South Korea and Japan as one of the tournament favourites having added the 2000 European title to their 1998 world

Senegal were the first to jolt the air of confidence around the Gallic camp, the tournament debutants inflicting a stunning 1-0 win over

their former colonial masters.

A goalless draw against Uruguay and a 2-0 loss to Denmark put paid to France's title defence in the most crushing of manners.

The Blues returned home under a halo of humiliation as the worst club in their group with not even a single goal to their name - a first in the history of the competition.

They were the first reigning titleholders not to advance from the first round since Brazil in 1966.

Theories for the collapse abounded, focusing on the injury to Zinedine Zidane, who made a belated appearance in France's last game against the Danes, and an

ineffective old guard. Raymond Domenech was handed the task of reconstructing France from the ashes of Asia and the relative failure under his predecessor Jacques Santini at Euro

But an indifferent 2006 World Cup qualifying campaign in which France only sealed top spot in an eminently winnable group on the final day has hardly helped fuel the

flames of expectation for Germany. Domenech though believes his side have one crucial advantage over Lemerre's class of 2002.

"From what we've heard from the veterans of the 2002 World Cup they turned up there with their brains 'cooked'," Domenech said. "They were jaded and it's that scenario which we have to avoid this time around. "The most important thing is

mental freshness. The players must have at least a week's break from football. If they're good in their heads then the preparation's been a To this end Domenech packed his players off on a week's holiday

before a pre-World Cup training camp in the French Alps with the following advice ringing in their ears:

"Turn off the television and the telephone, go away with your family, go to a country where you don't speak the language so that no one can talk to you about football -

deepest Asia, the far reaches of

China, or a forgotten island." He added with a grin: "The United States isn't a bad destination either. They don't know what football

is there! With a reputation as a disciplinarian and a sharp sense of irony the professorial former French under-21 coach has an uneasy rapport with his national media exacerbated when having announced the squad he refused to answer questions and instead gave his first interview to a mobile phone company that is one

of the team's sponsors. But he knows more than anyone that whether he's hailed as a saviour or sinner will depend not on his prickly image in the press but on bare results.

Asked if his contract stipulated a specific target at the 2006 finals he said: "Since I read my contract the first time I signed it I don't know where I put it. The other day I looked for it but couldn't find it.

"But I don't need a written objective to provide me with pressure - my aim is to get to the final."

Domenech, capped eight times for his country, was appointed France coach on July 12, 2004, the day after the birth of his daughter. Her name? Victoire - something

he is out to achieve in Germany.

The Kids' Cup



AFP, Paris

Theo Walcott might have been dismaved by the mixture of scorn and shock that greeted his elevation to England's World Cup squad but he shouldn't be too concerned. Whether it's a teenage Pele

dazzling in 1958 or a fresh-faced

Michael Owen searing through Argentina's defence 40 years later, World Cup history has proved that the kids are usually alright. And that bodes well for a crop of

talented tyros who will be amongst the 736 players heading to a World Cup that is positively over-flowing with youthful promise. Leading the charge will be Argentina's prodigious young star

Lionel Messi, the Barcelona star who was in scintillating form before an injury ruled him out of the final months of the season. Messi, who will turn 19 during the

finals, is a veteran of Argentina's victorious youth World Cup win in 2005 and has already earned favourable comparisons to his idol Diego

Even Maradona himself has waxed lyrically about Messi's talent. "What most surprises me about

him is that he hasn't got control problems," Maradona said. "The ball remains on the upper part of his foot, like it is glued to it. He feels the ball, and that makes him different to the

"He's also got another gear, a sixth speed. And the best part of all is that he hasn't reached his peak."

As Argentina look to Messi to light up their challenge, Spain could well call upon another talented teenager, Cesc Fabregas, to provide their midfield with some attacking brio.

The 19-year-old was one of the stars of Arsenal's run to the final of the Champions League this season, and is being tipped to shine in the World Cup by former Highbury idol Paul

"If he can get in the Spain team he could be the main player in the World Cup," said Merson. "He's that good. He can be a dark horse and maybe

assault where they've been before."

Fabregas is joined in the Spanish ranks by another young starlet, Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos, who became his country's youngest player in 63 years when he appeared in a friendly against China last year

Ramos, who has only just turned 20, is the second most expensive teenager in world football last year when he signed from Sevilla for 19 million pounds.

Until now, the most expensive teenager had been England's talismanic striker Wayne Rooney, a snip at 27 million pounds when Manchester United bought him from Everton in 2004. Rooney, still only 20, has been picked for England's squad but is a doubtful participant because of a broken foot.

Yet England's squad will not be lacking young blood, with the uncapped Walcott and Tottenham's Aaron Lennon the surprise choices in Sven-Goran Eriksson's 23-man

While 19-year-old Lennon's inclusion was universally applauded after the Spurs winger's superb form in the Premiership, Walcott's selection has divided opinion in England, where it is viewed as either a gamble too far or a stroke of genius.

Walcott has not even played in England's top division for his club Arsenal, who signed him in January in a deal that could cost up to 12 million pounds.

Eriksson, who has never seen Walcott play, admitted that the youngster's selection is a risk but believes the teenager's electrifying pace and poise could give England a useful impact weapon from the substitutes bench. "Walcott is a huge talent and I

think he's mentally ready," said Eriksson. "I don't think anyone

expects him to come on against Brazil and score three goals but he deserves to be here. "I don't think he has any fear and why should he? He was surprised to be picked but he fits in, and

he is very quick."

Dyer arrested for indecent

AFP, London

Newcastle midfielder Kieron Dyer was arrested after a woman complained that he had indecently exposed himself. Press Association citing police sources said on Thursday

Dyer, 27, had been released on police bail without charge pending further investigation, sources said. The investigation centred on an alleged incident at a hotel in Norwich, eastern England, earlier this year, sources said.

A spokeswoman for Norfolk Police would only say a 27-year-old man had been arrested and released on police bail by officers investigating an allegation of indecent exposure

She refused to confirm or deny whether the man was Dyer. Dyer moved to Newcastle from Ipswich for six million pounds in 1999 and has won 16 England caps.

The footballer's agent, Jonathan Barnett, declined to comment on the incident. A Newcastle United spokeswoman referred all inquiries to Mr

Rui returns to Benfica

AFP, Lisbon

AC Milan's Portuguese midfielder Rui Costa has quit the Italian side to return to Benfica where he started his career, a spokesman for the Lisbonbased club said Thursday

He gave no details of the deal but Portugal's sports press said the player, who had one year left with AC Milan, had signed a one-vear deal with Benfica with the option of an extension for another year.

"I am very pleased to be welcomed by fans, to see that Benfica players are happy about the possibility of my return," he told reporters as he arrived at Lisbon's airport on Tuesday. Rui 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.

Vidmar retires

INTERNET, undated

Ex-Rangers, Middlesboro and Cardiff defender Tony Vidmar has been forced to retire from football due to a serious heart condition.

The 35 year-old Australian, who was due to be part of his country's FIFA World Cup finals squad, has a blood clot and a narrowed artety and he will now undergo surgery to

correct the problem. "Six months ago I was on top of the world and now my world has collapsed," Vidmar said. "Going to the World Cup was always my goal, but I was told that to keep on playing could be fatal. I have a girlfriend and two kids, and I want to be there when they grow up. In the short term it is very disappointing but there is more to life for me."

Vidmar was playing in Holland for NAC Breda.

Milan official under the spotlight

AFP, Rome

An AC Milan official has for the first time become directly involved in a match-fixing affair in a new twist to the Italian football scandal which

has been raging the past few weeks. The Corriere della Sera newspaper on Thursday published transcripts of telephone conversations of Leonardo Meani, the only AC Milan official facing match-fixing charges by Naples prosecutors in the 2004/05 Italian championship won by Juventus.

In a taped conversation dating back to April 19 last year, Meani expressed anger at an Italian football federation official responsible for designating linesman, Gennaro Mazzei, for Milan's 2-1 defeat against Siena when Milan had a goal disallowed. "Now pay attention (...) Send us

Consolo, not just to Turin. Do you understand?." Meani was quoted as saying about Andrea Consolo, a linesman who has already appeared in telephone conversations as one of the officials most wanted by Juventus director general Luciano Moggi. According to the Corriere della

Sera transcription, Mazzei, also facing charges by Naples prosecutors, appears to give way under pressure from the Milan official. This new revelation in the Italian press comes at a time of rising

concern over the publication of entire pages of telephone conversations in theory protected by secrecy AC Milan are one of four teams. with Juventus, Fiorentina and Lazio, being investigated by Naples prose-

cutors on charges of sporting fraud with 41 people placed under judicial investigation, including nine referees and 11 linesmen. However the role each club played in the affair has not yet been

worked out and only one AC Milan official is facing charges. AC Milan owner and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has on several occa-

sions called for the last two Italian league titles, won by Juventus, to be handed to AC Milan. Moggi was sacked last week amid the burgeoning Italian football scandal, a complex affair which has

many strands and separate investi-Moggi is in the spotlight after Italian papers published transcripts of phone calls intercepted in 2004 between him and Pierluigi Pairetto, head of the Italian referees' associa-

ees' commission. In the conversations, Moggi tells Pairetto which referees he wants assigned to certain Juventus matches in Serie A and the Champions League.

tion and a member of UEFA's refer-

Ze plans to move from Germany

REUTERS, Weggis

Brazil's Ze Roberto is leaving Bayern Munich after four seasons and plans to continue his career outside Germany, the midfielder said on Wednesday.

"I think that my time in Germany is certainly up, I've conquered a lot of titles there." he told reporters before a training session with the world champions. "At the moment, my mind is

my future after the World Cup. "There are already some offers. I'm well known in the European market, I've been there for eight vears.'

focused on Brazil and I'll know about

"I've played in prestigious clubs such as Bayer Leverkusen, Real Madrid and Bavern Munich, so I've got nothing to fear in terms of my

Ze Roberto won three Bundesliga and two German Cup titles during his spell with Bayern.

Toni a la Toto Schillaci?



REUTERS, Milan

Sixteen years ago Italy turned to Salvatore "Toto" Schillaci as their World Cup striker despite the Sicilian's lack of international experience and this year in Germany coach Marcello Lippi is pinning his hopes on another player who has made a late surge in his career.

Unlike the vast majority of players going to the World Cup, Luca Toni has never played in the Champions League and he was virtually unknown outside Italy a year ago. This season, however, Toni has

been one of Europe's most danger-

ous strikers, leading the Serie A scoring charts throughout the campaign and establishing himself as Lippi's first-choice striker. Like Schillaci, Toni is a late devel-

oper -- he made his Serie A debut aged 23, for Vicenza in a 2-0 defeat to AC Milan in October 2000. The following year he moved on to Brescia, where he paired up with former World Footballer of the Year Roberto Baggio, then in the twilight of his career. It was a classic pairing of

Toni's job was to put his 1.93-metre frame at Baggio's service, working as a targetman or muscle to add the finishing touch to moves or give his partner more space and a fraction of a second longer

They worked well together, for a season, at least. Toni scored 13 oals in 28 games in his first year with the



LUCA TONI

north Italian side, but slipped into obscurity during his second, hitting the target just twice

At the start of the 2003-04 season he was sold on to Palermo, then in Serie B. What appeared to be a step down, however, turned out to be an

season in Sicily he scored 30 times to lead Palermo back into the top flight

for the first time since 1973. Many doubted he would prove quite so impressive against tighter Serie A defences but Toni made a

triumphant return to Serie A, scoring 20 goals as Palermo finished sixth. Fiorentina, rebuilding their team, believed that he would bring goals to the Stadio Franchi and spent \$12.15 million on the striker, whose ungainly

It was money well spent -- Toni has provided Fiorentina with the goalscoring striker they have lacked since the departure of their Argentine

movement belies a canny positional

hero Gabriel Batistuta. Lippi, was among the first to recognise his talent, calling him up to make his international debut in Italy's 2-0 friendly defeat to Iceland in August 2004 -- Lippi's first match in charge after taking over from Giovanni Trapattoni.

Since then, he has developed into the leading striker of Lippi's tenure, with his scoring feats including a hat-trick in Italy's 4-1 win over World Cup qualifying rivals Belarus in

Laporta slams English for poaching

Football

INTERNET, undated Barcelona president Joan Laporta

English clubs for poaching some of the club's best young talent. The Spanish and European champions invest heavily in their football academy but have watched

Premiership clubs sign their rising

stars for nominal fees in recent years.

has launched a fierce attack on

The highest profile player to have left the Nou Camp for England is Cesc Fabregas, the Spanish international midfielder who played a major role in Arsenal reaching the Champions League final, but they have also lost Gerard Pique to Manchester United and are now on the verge of losing promising midfielder Fran Merida, again

'We are a club that has invested

seven million euros (around £4.8million) in our youth team this season,' said Laporta during a coaching clinic in the Canary Islands. 'But we have a big problem with

'Before they used to do it with French clubs and now it seems as though we are next.

English clubs who are targeting our

'The problem is that English clubs don't have their own youth system and so they have to find players elsewhere. 'The British clubs offer astronomi-

cal figures to kids who are 14, 15 and

16, a figure that for ethical reasons we

'We had this situation with Cesc Fabregas, Gerard Pique and now with Fran Merida.' The 19-year-old defender Pique ioined Manchester United from

Barcelona in July 2004 while Arsenal

could sign Merida without spending a

penny because of a legal loophole.

cannot equal.

The player's parents had put pen to paper on a Barca contract on his behalf in 2003 - the club's youth players have to sign an amateur contract and a pre-working contract - but the contract which needed three club signatures only had one.

The player has been on trial with

Diaz, who was also the man responsible for taking Fabregas to Arsenal, added: 'He is currently on holiday but he will not be returning to

Laporta is hoping that football's

Arsenal in recent weeks,' the player's

agent Joseba Diaz told PASport.

governing bodies can resolve the 'The international organisations should regulate this issue, 'he said.

'But we are still happy because we can be proud to have almost 50% of our team composed of youth team

Scolari's chance for history



REUTERS, Lisbon

Global speculation linking Luiz Felipe Scolari with the job of England coach dominated the world's sporting headlines at the end of April until the 57-year-old Brazilian said he did not

want the iob. While he would have made history by becoming the first Brazilian to coach the national team of the motherland of football, he can still make history in the World Cup by becoming the first man to win the competition

with two different countries. All he has to do is lead Portugal to

victory in Germany. While Scolari knows there is only a slim chance of bringing the trophy back to Lisbon, he could leave the job with his head held high if Portugal at least reach the quarter-finals. That is, if he leaves the job at all.

After what looked like a realistic chance of moving to England collapsed, the Portuguese FA and Scolari

36 Parka

37 Singing

38 Wields

40 Verdi

hatchet

opera

42 Rower's

43 "Doctor

48 Noise

49 Great

50 Cupid's

51 Brewery

53 Un-

DOWN

specialty

product

52 Stationery

quantity

surface

Zhivago'

writer

feature

CROSSWORD

1 Hotel

emplovee

5 Applaud

milieu

fraction

Hatter's

affair

writer

17 Slithery

18 Charlie

19 Pigs

Brown's

nemesis

21 Rued the

24 Quantum

25 Burden

26 Uncompli

mentary

remark

applause

30 Acknowl

edae

32 "Xanadu"

band

33 Mason,

initials

McBeal or

Matlock

35 "Lion King"

baddie

particle

15 "Vanity

13 Grant or

12 Farm

14 Mad

became very guarded about his future plans. He may stay, he may go and nothing will be decided until after the finals appeared to be the new message from Lisbon.

Away from the media speculation over his future, Scolari, who steered his native Brazil to their fifth title in 2002, will be helped by working with largely the same squad that reached the Euro 2004 final before losing to Greece.

"We will go to Germany with the idea of winning or, at least to reach the final, but to get there is a long road," he

Portugal to get a place in Germany with nine wins and three draws in qualifying. No stranger to controversy, he was

keeper Vitor Baia out of the Euro 2004 squad. But he appealed to the Portuguese to support the national team, which often comes a poor second to the club sides. The result has been crowds

who roar on Portugal. His antics as a coach have been no less controversial, although he has toned down his act considerably since

By Eugene Sheffer

22 Rail's

23 'The

cousin

House

of the

Gables

writer

24 Compas

otherwise

26 007

27 Wish

28 Wings

29 Conser

34 "Alley- --!

35 Combing

37 Praiseful

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notes

down a

cab

40 Largest

41 Particular

45-Down

reply to

"Am so!"

Gardner

45 See 44-

Down

47 Frat party

44 With

38 Last

39 Flag

Grapes of 31 Flourish

2 Essen

expletive

3 George's

brother

5 Jazz

tooned (in)

trumpeter

Baker

6 Entice-

ment

7 - Khan

matter of

Wrath"

Haver

school

vessel

20 Stir-fry

1 Wrestling 21 Actress

Solution time: 21 mins.

8 It's a

9 "The

10 Sharp

11 New

he has been an international manager

At club level in Brazil though, he

was famous for his heightened sense

of "gamesmanship" -- ordering

ballboys to delay returning the ball,

whipping up a storm on the touchline,

generally doing everything he possibly could to give his team any advantage Scolari debuted as a player with Aimore in Brazil and began coaching in 1982. After stints at home and in the

He would love to echo that feat and return to Portugal with the first major international trophy in their

CRYPTOQUIP

BAJP ODY PD ZDPRJS BNPW

WD TJ NP JPHKSDPXJPWNZKGW, GDXJ XKRAW GNO ODY'HJ

TJJP MJ-PNWYSJM. Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF AN ARTIST LIKED SKETCHING ESCALATORS, I GUESS HE WOULD

DRAW A LOT OF STAIRS. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: O equals Y

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe

give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Middle East, he joined Criciuma in 1991 and led them to the Brazil Cup. He made his name at Brazilian side Gremio, who won several titles, including South America's Libertadores Cup. The man known as 'Big Phil' helped In June 2001 he became Brazil's fourth coach in a year. Scolari ignored widespread criticism of his 3-5-2 formation as his team won all seven games to claim the world title. criticised when he left veteran goal-