



Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon (L) signs autographs after a press conference in Duisburg on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Vieri joins Sampdoria

AFP, Genoa

Former Italy striker Christian Vieri has signed for Sampdoria from Monaco, the Italian club announced Thursday.

The 32-year-old spent just half a season in the French principality after an unsuccessful six-month spell at AC Milan.

But Sampdoria have ended Vieri's brief exile by signing the player for 800,000 euros (1.02 million dollars).

The Genoan outfit have become Vieri's 11th Italian club in a sometimes glorious career that saw him win the championship with Juventus in 1997, the European Cup Winners' Cup with Lazio in 1999 and the Italian golden boot with 24 goals for Inter Milan in 2003.

Vieri has scored 130 goals in 222 top-flight Italian matches and also had one stunning season at Atletico Madrid in which he scored 24 goals in 24 league appearances.

However, his hopes of making the Italian World Cup squad for the third time in a row were hit by knee problems at Monaco where he scored three times in just seven appearances.

Newcastle in Beckham bid

AFP, London

Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd is attempting to bring David Beckham to the Premiership club in an ambitious bid for the former England captain, according to a report on Friday.

The 31-year-old Beckham, who resigned the England captaincy after they were knocked out by Portugal in the World Cup quarterfinals, and his wife Victoria, had talks with Shepherd in London on Thursday, according to the Daily Mail.

Newcastle did not deny the news with a statement on the club website on Friday saying: "Newcastle never comment on transfer speculation."

"The club has always enjoyed a close relationship with Real Madrid and would never do anything to spoil that relationship."

And it is said Shepherd has told Beckham he would be given the Magpies number seven shirt once worn by Kevin Keegan plus a financial package that would see him take home 120,000 pounds (173,000 euros) a week plus image rights that would earn a percentage of shirt sales.

Real Madrid are keen to keep the former Manchester United midfielder, with Fabio Capello saying he is important to the club, but Michael Owen's injury agony has made Shepherd determined to recruit a new hero.

Cynics will no doubt mock the idea of Newcastle signing Beckham but he could find the lure of a return to England too much to turn down and Shepherd has before pulled off high-profile coups having signed Owen from Real just last summer.

Bilbao sack Clemente

AFP, Madrid

Bilbao coach Javier Clemente has been sacked, the Spanish first division club said on Friday.

No reason was given by the club for the sacking of the former Spain national coach who had led the Basque side since October last year.

Bilbao finished in 12th place in the league last season.

Buffon eyes Zenga's record



AFP, Duisburg

Gianluigi Buffon wants to win the World Cup by keeping another clean sheet in the final against France so that he can break the tournament record for not conceding a goal.

The 28-year-old Italy keeper has not been beaten since Cristian Zaccardo, his Azzurri team-mate, put through his own net in the 27th minute of the 1-1 draw with the United States in their second group stage match.

Since then, Buffon has gone 453 minutes without letting in a goal.

Walter Zenga, who played for Italy at the 1990 finals, holds the record for not conceding a goal in the competition, 517 minutes.

"Of course I'm interested in breaking the record, it would mean a lot," said Buffon at a press conference here on Thursday.

"But it's not just about personal satisfaction. If we don't concede another goal it will be down to the efforts of the whole team."

Zenga was unbeaten in all of the three group games against Austria, United States and Czechoslovakia.

His goal was unbreached in the second round game against Uruguay and then the quarter final against Ireland.

He was finally beaten in the 67th minute of the semi-final against Argentina when Claudio Caniggia headed past him.

Zenga surpassed the previous record held by former England keeper Peter Shilton, who went unbeaten for a total of 501 minutes spread over the 1982 and 1986 finals.

Buffon, whose club Juventus is at the centre of the Serie A match-fixing scandal, insisted his French counterpart, Fabien Barthez, was still an excellent keeper, despite some nervous moments in their semi-final win over Portugal.

"I honestly don't think he has made big mistakes at this World Cup," Buffon said.

"His strengths are that he always communicates with his team and distributes the ball well."

Buffon was named on Friday in FIFA's 23 man long list for their World Cup XI, which will be named on Monday, and faces competition from Germany's Jens Lehmann - a particular favourite of Buffon's - and Portugal's Ricardo.

But the Italy keeper insisted he was not the only one to shine between the posts.

"There have been lots of keepers that have made an impression on me here, but if I had to single out one it would be (Germany's) Jens Lehmann," he said.

"I hadn't seen much of him before the tournament, but he really has been outstanding."

"He has impressed me, not just because of his saves in the penalty shoot-out against Argentina (in the quarter-finals), but because of his reliability in general."

Heartbreaking homecoming



AFP, Berlin

Germany manager Jurgen Klinsmann admits it will be emotional returning to his hometown of Stuttgart for the World Cup third-place play-off with Portugal on Saturday but said he would rather be going to Berlin for the final.

Klinsmann's mother and father run a bakery in Stuttgart and the striker began his career at local club VfB Stuttgart before going on to play for Bayern Munich, Inter Milan, Tottenham Hotspur and Monaco in a glittering career.

"It is nice for me to be going back to Stuttgart as my family will be there and Joachim Low (Klinsmann's assistant) is at home too. But we still wanted to be in Berlin," Klinsmann said at Friday's press conference.

"This is not the final we wanted but we go to Stuttgart full of concentration for this mini final."

"It is a World Cup match and we will try to give the fans a great game."

At last year's Confederations Cup Germany defeated Mexico 4-3 in the third-place play-off and Klinsmann hopes for a similar game for the fans.

"The atmosphere is on the way back up after the Italy loss and we want to be there," said the 41-year-old.

"It is a bit like the Confederations Cup and we hope it is similar match."

After losing their semifinal 2-0 to Italy in extra-time Germany must pick themselves up for the consolation match and have not been helped by injuries.

It could also be Klinsmann's final game as manager should he decide not to extend his contract.

"As I have said before I will discuss the situation with my family before making a decision," said the 1990 World Cup victor. "I need some time to think."

There has been speculation that the United States want to make Klinsmann, whose family live in California, their next manager but he said there had been no approach.

"There is no contact with the United States at all," Klinsmann emphasised.

Germany fans will hope not.

Lehmann looks to Klinsi



AFP, Berlin

Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann admits he will wait to see whether manager Jurgen Klinsmann stays on in the job before deciding whether to carry on in the national team until Euro 2008.

Arsenal goalkeeper Lehmann shone for the hosts in his first ever World Cup but was helpless as Italy scored two extra-time goals to dump Germany out at the semifinal stage.

At 36 Lehmann is near the end of his career and admits his future hinges on that of coach Klinsmann who picked him in goal ahead of veteran custodian Oliver Kahn.

"I will think about my personal situation after the finals and certainly chat with Jurgen Klinsmann about it," Lehmann said at Thursday's press conference.

"Like all the other players I hope he stays as everybody wants to continue his work."

"If Jurgen decides that he does not want to continue the disappointment would be enormous as we do not know what is coming next."

Lehmann looked despondent in the press conference and admitted he was finding the Italy defeat hard

to stomach, particularly after losing the Champions League final with Arsenal prior to the finals.

"I feel worse than I did after the game as I have had time to reflect on it," Lehmann said. "As a player it is difficult to stomach missing out on the final."

"The disappointment of going so close to winning two major trophies this season will stay with me for a long time."

"I ask myself why but I can not find the answer at the moment."

Lehmann will make way for Kahn in Saturday's third-place play-off match with Portugal in Stuttgart but said he would have no qualms about doing so.

"If Oliver wants to play this match then he has earned it. He has been the model professional and worked hard in training," said the former Borussia Dortmund man.

Lehmann dislodged the 37-year-old Kahn as number one prior to the tournament after eight years as first choice.

Lehmann, meanwhile, has suggested that he wants club-mate Thierry Henry to finish as the World Cup's leading scorer ahead of Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski.

"If you have worked with a world-class striker like Thierry Henry on a daily basis for three years, you want him to win because I get a first-hand look at his class and professionalism each and every day," said Lehmann.

"But it would also be fantastic for Miro. He is my teammate now and I would be happy for him."

He added: "It would be nice for Poldi but he is so young that he can certainly get another shot later on," said Lehmann.

"If he wins it now, it might get into his head. He can accomplish it at a later stage of his career."

Kaiser sees tight final

AFP, Berlin

Sunday's World Cup final here between France and Italy will be a closely-fought affair which could well go to extra-time and even penalties in the view of German legend Franz Beckenbauer.

The player known as "The Kaiser" for his imperial style of play, said that he saw the final as a real 50-50 match-up.

"It could go to extra-time and even penalties," he said. "The two teams both had problems to start with but they are now on the top of their form."

Beckenbauer, a World Cup winner for West Germany as a player in 1974 and as a coach in 1990, was largely instrumental in getting FIFA to award the 2006 finals to Germany.

Ageing France, renewed vigour



AFP, Berlin

France's stunning march to Sunday's World Cup final provides a robust riposte to those who had the gall to write off Raymond Domenech's side as faded stars well past their sell by date.

Four of the team - Zinedine Zidane, Lilian Thuram, Patrick Vieira and Fabian Barthez - have rolled back the years in Germany to give themselves a second shot at a title they captured in Paris back in 1998.

The quartet - boasting a combined age of 133 years and more caps than you'd find in the New York Yankees' locker room - is a ringing endorsement of the old adage that

there's life in the old dog yet - their levels of fitness a triumph to their hunger for glory and the work of the French team's medical and training staff.

Who needs performance enhancers when you have the services of the French team doctor, Jean-Pierre Paquet, on your side?

This group of veterans, along with David Trezeguet and Thierry Henry, who was on the bench that night at the Stade de France, aim to join a select band of only 21 players in the history of the World Cup to have twice played on winning sides.

France downed Brazil 3-0 in Paris eight years ago, with Zidane the author of two bullet headers.

Barthez and Thuram also started, with Vieira coming on as a substitute. Henry was set to be introduced late on only for Marcel Desailly's sending off to force an abrupt change in tactics by then manager Aime Jacquet.

Despite the bulk of Les Bleus being the wrong side of 30 and averaging five years older a man, they ran Spain ragged in their 3-1 second round win in Hanover last week, then meted out the same treatment to Brazil in the quarterfinals.

After the Spanish win in which Vieira and Zidane produced goals, Domenech paid a playful tribute to his veterans.

"Patrick was written off, Zizou ought not to be playing... But our little team of oldies are still in there."

"They may be old but they are patient."

He added: "I'm happy for Zidane. He's 34 and he was running right to the end of the match. And then to score. That was incredible."

France's sports bible L'Equipe added its own accolade after Wednesday's defeat of Portugal.

"This reaching of a second World Cup final, eight years after 1998,

proves the excellence of a generation of players as well as the whole French football set-up," the paper wrote.

France Soir believed France's journey to the summit had received a little help from on high.

"The gods are with us," it suggested after Portugal had been added to their growing list of scalps.

"The Italians will be trembling in their boots."

Zidane, Barthez and Thuram will be taking their international curtain-call on Sunday, and Domenech insisted their place in history is assured.

"This generation have left their mark on an era."

"I'm happy for Zidane and the others, happy to see that they didn't bow out on a low day of France v Greece (in the Euro 2004 quarterfinal) and that they'll be finishing with something magnificent."

Batistuta wants Argentina job

AFP, Buenos Aires

Former Argentina international Gabriel Batistuta has said he would like to coach the national team, following the resignation of Jose Pekerman.

Pekerman resigned after Argentina, who played superbly in early matches, were knocked out on penalties by World Cup hosts Germany in the quarterfinals.

"I have always said I did not wish to be a coach but the Argentina team is something special. That would be a great honour," Batistuta told the TyC television station.

"It's something you cannot refuse and that's why I would accept it if I was asked."

The 37-year-old Batistuta, who top scored for Fiorentina in the Italian league in 1995, had however said he had hoped Pekerman would have remained in charge following Argentina's defeat to Germany.

Wily Alex wary of Zizou



AFP, Duisburg

Alessandro Del Piero has expressed his deep admiration for former Juventus teammate Zinedine Zidane, but said it would be a mistake for Italy to concentrate solely on nullifying the threat of the France playmaker in Sunday's World Cup final.

"He has performed magnificently so far and I hope that ends on Sunday," said 31-year-old Del Piero of the Real Madrid midfield maestro who will retire from football after the Berlin showpiece.

"Him and me have a great relationship and I have fond memories

of when we played in European matches together for Juventus.

"He's the absolute number one. From a player's point of view, I don't know what else you can say about Zizou that hasn't been said already."

"How do we stop him? With the same spirit we have shown up until now, we can overcome any problem."

"But France have other dangerous players who can hurt you in an instant. We have to make sure we keep an eye on everybody."

Del Piero, who scored Italy's second goal in the last seconds of their 2-0 extra-time semifinal win over hosts Germany after coming off the bench, is relishing the prospect of facing France, even though he will probably be among the substitutes again.

"It's a fantastic challenge, it

doesn't get any better than France," said the Juventus striker.

"They are a team full of winners, above all Zizou."

Del Piero admitted he hasn't found it easy being a substitute having made just one start for the Azzurri, against Australia in the second round.

"My only thought when I go on the pitch is to make the most of my opportunity," he said.

"It's not easy to come on in the last few minutes and score a goal. I would love to have more time out there, but the coach makes the choices and I respect that."

Del Piero has added motivation for wanting to beat France on Sunday having missed two golden opportunities to score against them in the final of Euro 2000.

Italy were leading 1-0 when Del Piero spurned his chances, and France came back to win 2-1 thanks to David Trezeguet's golden goal.

Del Piero was hurt by those who blamed him for Italy's defeat six years ago.

"I said some strong things at the time and I don't regret it," he said.

"We always have to put up with critics, but you can't accuse me of not giving everything. I play with my legs, but also my heart."

Del Piero believes France are favourites for Sunday's final because they have less off-field problems.

Italy's World Cup campaign has been overshadowed by the Serie A match-fixing scandal which could see four clubs - including Del Piero's Juventus - relegated from the top division.

"Above all France don't have the same chaos going on in their domestic league as we have," he said, though in fairness the majority of the French squad play football abroad.

Kewell out but no gout

AFP, London

English Premiership side Liverpool said on Friday that Australian striker Harry Kewell will be out of action for six weeks with a foot problem, but said tests had shown he was not suffering from gout.

A statement from Liverpool said that doctors had established that Kewell was ruled out of his country's World Cup second-round match with Italy because of septic arthritis in the joints of his left foot, and not gout as was reported at the time.

"An Australian teammate suggested that Harry had been suffering from gout which we can confirm was an incorrect diagnosis," the club said, without naming the teammate.

"Following Harry's return to Liverpool and examination by our own medical staff it became apparent he was suffering from an entirely different condition."

"This was identified as septic arthritis, a bacterial infection in the joints of his left foot."

"Harry is currently undergoing treatment in hospital following a surgical procedure. He is expected to make a complete recovery and should be able to resume training in approximately six weeks time."

Kewell, 27, helped Australia to reach the last 16 of a World Cup for the first time in their history, scoring the equaliser in the 2-2 draw with Croatia which secured their qualification.

He has been dogged by injury since joining Liverpool from Leeds in 2003 and the latest setback makes him a major doubt to be fit when Liverpool take on Chelsea in the Community Shield on August 13, said Lehmann.

Robson named Ipswich boss

AFP, London

Ex-England manager Bobby Robson has been named president of former club and Championship side Ipswich Town.

The 73-year-old, who managed the Tractor Boys for 13 years before being appointed England boss in 1982, is the club's first president since the death of Lady Blanche Cobbold in 1987.

Robson, whose new position is an honorary role only, presided over the most successful period in Ipswich's history, winning the FA Cup, the UEFA Cup and twice finishing runners-up in the league.

He said: "I am extremely flattered to have been asked to become the president of Ipswich Town football club."

"Despite going on to manage England, Barcelona and Newcastle, the 13 years in charge at Portman Road were among the happiest days of my managerial career."

Toddler steals the show



AFP, Duisburg

A toddler stole the show as around 2,000 Italian fans flocked to the Azzurri's Meiderich training ground here on Thursday to give their idols a rousing send-off before the World Cup final against France.

The supporters came to see their heroes in blue, but they saved the biggest cheer for a little boy who interrupted the session by climbing over a fence and running onto the pitch.

The players stopped in their tracks as the cheeky tot, dressed in an Italian shirt, ran to the nearest

ball and went on a mazy dribble upfield towards the squad.

A security guard quickly intervened and carried the boy off the field and handed him over to his parents.

Many of the fans wore Italian shirts while others waved green, white and red flags in the last training session open to the public before the squad fly to Berlin for Sunday's showpiece.

The fans greeted their heroes with chants of 'Italia, Italia' before singing 'Happy Birthday' to striker Alberto Gilardino, who turned 24 on Wednesday.

The only Italian player in the 23-man squad who didn't train was Alessandro Nesta. The AC Milan central defender has a groin strain and will not play in the final.



Italy striker Alessandro Del Piero (L) signs an autograph to a young fan (attired in a Totti shirt) at a training session in Duisburg on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP