

Leg op for Ronaldo

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil striker Ronaldo will undergo minor surgery on his left leg here Saturday, the national team doctor Jose Luiz Runco said.

Runco said that the Real Madrid player has suffered from a calcification problem on his tibia for eight months although he still played at the World Cup where the defending champions were knocked out by France in the quarterfinals.

Grosso pens Inter deal

INTERNET, undated

Italy's World Cup hero Fabio Grosso is officially an Inter player after he completed his move from Palermo yesterday.

The two clubs initially agreed a 4m-pound transfer fee before the World Cup Finals and the defender was in Milan on Thursday to finalise his switch.

The left-back, who slotted home the winning penalty in the Germany 2006 Final against France, has penned a contract until June 2010.

Grosso spent the morning at the Saras offices of Inter owner Massimo Moratti who has publicly praised the stopper in recent weeks.

Grosso then transferred himself to the outfit's headquarters where he held a meeting with technical director Marco Branca and sporting director Gabriele Orlandi.

The new boy also spent a brief period with boss Roberto Mancini as they discussed plans for next term.

Grosso will be officially unveiled to the media once he and his pregnant wife have spent a few weeks on holiday in Sardinia.

Camoranesi hails super Brazil

INTERNET, undated

Azzurri winger Mauro Camoranesi has conceded that Brazil remain the best team on the planet despite Italy's World Cup success.

The Juventus star made the claim after arriving in Argentina, the country of his birth, for a post Germany 2006 holiday.

"I think that the only side who had more quality than us was Brazil," said the former Verona midfielder. "However, they were eliminated in the last eight."

"We were certainly not favourites to win, but we knew that we had a good squad who could have a good competition. Perhaps we didn't think we could win, but were confident we would do well."

Camoranesi's comments weren't well received by the Argentine scribes who immediately asked whether their nation was weaker than Brazil despite their great showing at the World Cup.

"Let's just say that Argentina are on the same level as Germany, England and Italy," dribbled the wide man.

"Who would have won in a game between Argentina and Italy? It would have been a balanced tie," he continued. "Italy could have won it or drawn..."

Camoranesi made five appearances in the competition and did add a certain stability to the Azzurri midfield as a result.

"It was a marvellous experience," added Camoranesi. "I had personally only ever seen celebrations like that on television."

"Whoever plays football dreams about such moments. I can assure you that it is so much better being at the centre of such a situation."

Benfica aiming for membership record

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica launched a membership drive on Thursday with the aim of smashing Manchester United's title as the world's most widely-supported football club by the end of the year, club officials said.

The English club has 152,000 paid up members according to the Guinness Book of World Records, compared to 151,424 for Benfica.

To surpass Manchester United the Portuguese club put a "membership kit" on sale on Thursday which includes two tickets to a club match, a DVD with match highlights, a visit to the club's stadium, a poster and the choice of either a team hat or scarf in addition to a membership card.

The kit is available at 3,800 location across the country and costs 55 euros (70 US dollars) for adults and 25 euros for those under the age of 18, Benfica marketing manager Miguel Bento said.

"Last year we had various waves of new paid members. We expect to surpass the mark of 152,000 paid members by the end of 2006," he said.



Inter Milan players (L-R: Francesco Toldo, Javier Zanetti, and Ivan Cordoba) pose with the new jerseys at the Pinetina training centre near Como, northern Italy on Friday.

Head-butt iconic moment for US

AFP, Washington

The United States, where football is still a second-tier sport, was nonetheless fascinated by the saga of French star Zinedine Zidane and his fateful head-butt in the World Cup final.

Some observers wasted no time in pointing out that Zidane's head-butt, paradoxically, raised football to a profile previously unknown in the land of basketball, baseball and footballs with pointed ends.

"His renown is at its highest level among soccer fans even if what happened creates some doubt and uneasiness," American University health and sport promotion professor Pete Mehlert told AFP.

A San Jose Mercury News columnist wrote on Thursday: "I don't know how long it will last and I don't know if the soccer elite likes it but this is soccer's moment in America, unexpected, raw but very real."

The Wall Street Journal wondered what sorts of insults Italian defender Marco Materazzi might have flung prior to the altercation, in its headline: "What did 'animal' say to anger 'God'?"

Even the Los Angeles Times weighed in once Zidane finally

broke his silence on France's Canal Plus network after "speculation across the globe has focused on several possibilities" on the nature of invective from the Italian player, which Zidane told French television were "very personal" and concerned his mother and his sister.

The Los Angeles Times called Zidane a "fallen hero," who "marked a bitter ugly end to the storied career" of an icon.

Mehlert noted: "There are always incidents like this. We don't know when a player is going to snap."

The weekly magazine Sports Illustrated said, "We Americans are no strangers to trash talking... but the idea is that both the talker and the target know that's not personal."

Basketball star Michael Jordan was famed not only for his leaps, but also his expertise in verbal assaults.

"Zidane summoned his inner Mike Tyson providing us all with a brutally and beautifully American moment at the climax of the galaxy's most-watched event," the San Jose Mercury News said.

Tyson is well remembered in the United States for biting off a portion of opponent Evander Holyfield's ear during a 1997 bout in Las Vegas.

Comments from official circles

were few. When asked, Major League Soccer preferred to point to the numbers of US viewers: 17 million watched the July 9 match, twice as many as saw the 2002 final in South Korea and aired at an inconvenient hour in the United States.

Valencia want Del Horno

INTERNET, undated

Valencia have revealed they are interested in signing Chelsea defender Asier Del Horno.

Club president Juan Soler confirmed the Primera Liga side are keen to recruit the 25-year-old Spain international, and are currently trying to secure a deal to lure him away from Stamford Bridge.

Del Horno, who joined the Premiership champions from Athletic Bilbao last summer, has struggled to command a regular place in Jose Mourinho's side after initially making a promising start for the London club.

"Del Horno is a very interesting player and our technical team has been following him," Soler told Las Provincias newspaper.

Zuberbuehler joins West Brom

REUTERS, London

Switzerland's record-setting World Cup goalkeeper Pascal Zuberbuehler signed for West Bromwich Albion on Friday, the English club said.

West Brom, who were relegated from the Premier League in May, said the 35-year-old joined from FC Basel on a free transfer, signing a two-year contract.

Zuberbuehler kept a clean sheet in six-and-a-half hours of football at the World Cup finals in Germany as the Swiss became the first team in history to be eliminated from the tournament without conceding a goal.

Switzerland drew 0-0 with France in their opening Group G match before beating Togo and South Korea 2-0 in their other group games to qualify for the second round. The Swiss then drew 0-0 with Ukraine but went out on penalties.

City reject 'tapping up' allegations

INTERNET, undated

Manchester City have defended themselves against allegations from Bolton chairman Phil Gartside that they 'tapped up' new signing Dietmar Hamann.

The German midfielder signed for City on Wednesday, ending a bizarre 24 hours which saw him initially leave Liverpool for Bolton before completing the Blues deal.

Having already informed Bolton he no longer wished to join them, the Trotters felt they had little option other than to let Hamann move - with City stumping up around £400,000 compensation - although Gartside was distinctly unimpressed by the conduct of Hamann and City.

'Soccer is new to States'

AFP, Stralsund

US First Lady Laura Bush on Thursday explained the wireless US flop at the World Cup by saying that soccer has yet to catch on in the United States.

"Americans really are just learning about soccer. It's a new sport to the United States. I guess you can tell it's a new sport by the way our team plays," she said during a visit here.

Bush, here for talks between US President George W. Bush and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said that she and her husband had watched the dramatic final that saw Italy triumph over France.

"We watched the games when the US played, but we also watched the finals between France and Italy at the White House. My husband and I watched those games together," said the first lady.

"I guess we did not do very well, but we did play Germany, and I think that's when we lost, isn't it, the last time when we were out," she said. The United States played the Czech Republic, Italy and Ghana, but not Germany.

"You know, Americans really don't know that much about soccer. And the World Cup still was very interesting to Americans. Americans watched," she said.

Unenviable task for Loew

AFP, Berlin

Germany's new coach Joachim Loew has the unenviable job of stepping into the shoes of a man who could do no wrong for the past month.

When Jurgen Klinsmann announced on Wednesday that he would not continue at the helm of the national team, Germany was plunged into despair, even though the decision was widely expected.

Klinsmann, 41, said he was "burned out" after leading the host nation to the semi-finals of the World Cup and was returning to his home in California to spend more time with his family.

He handed over the reins to Loew, his assistant during two years of often intense pressure whom he described as "far more than my right-hand man - he is my partner".

Yet Loew, 46, does not come to the job with the already formidable reputation that Klinsmann, as a World Cup-winning striker, enjoyed.

Loew was a modest player who spent just two seasons in the Bundesliga, at Eintracht Frankfurt and Karlsruhe, and spent most of his career in the second tier of the Bundesliga at SC Freiburg.

When he trained as a coach, he did so alongside Klinsmann, who had graced clubs such as Bayern Munich, Inter Milan and Tottenham, and the two hit it off immediately.

They shared a passion for sports psychology and the art of motivating players and they stayed in touch when Klinsmann moved to the United States when his playing career ended in 1998.

Loew made a low-key start to his coaching career, in charge of the junior team of Swiss club Winterthur, before taking over the reins of Bundesliga club VfB Stuttgart in 1996, leading them to a fourth-place finish in the Bundesliga and the German Cup in 1997.

But when Stuttgart lost the Cup Winners' Cup final to English club Chelsea the following year, Loew was sacked.

He tried his luck abroad, first in Turkey at Fenerbahce and Adanaspor and then in Austria, where he won the only league title on his CV, with FC Tirol in 2001-2002.

Loew was building a reputation as a competent coach, but a difficult customer for club chairmen. Those were the qualities Klinsmann was looking for when he was named national coach in 2004.

He turned to his old friend as a key part of his drive to break down the old guard of German football.

"He has a lot more tactical knowledge than me and I rely on him completely," Klinsmann said.

Less than a year after Klinsmann took over, he was at loggerheads with the powerful Bundesliga clubs over what he saw as the insufficient fitness of players.

Loew was the target of the clubs' anger, with Bayern Munich general manager Uli Hoeness lashing out at his lack of experience at major clubs.

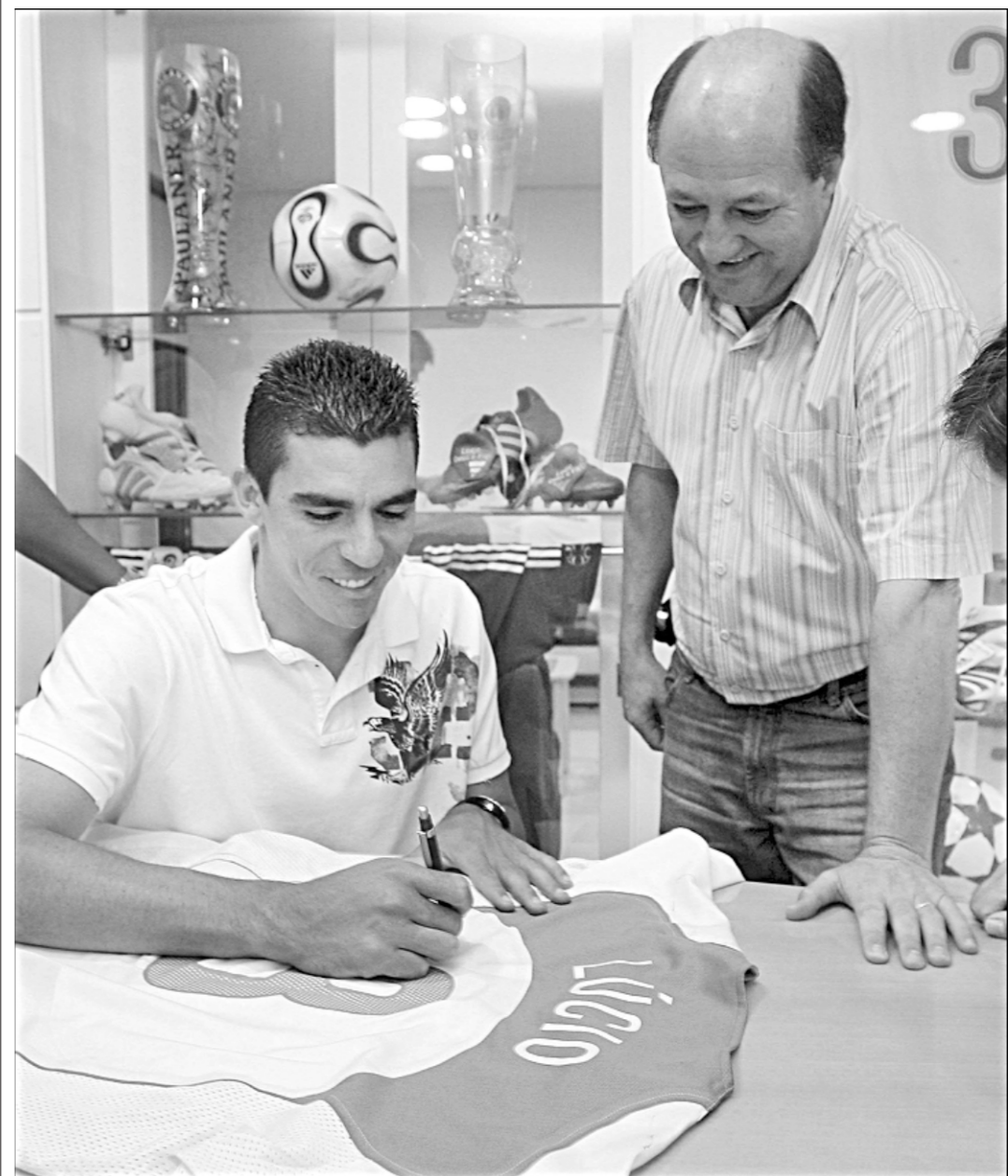
"I don't care what Joachim Loew thinks, I know what I am talking about," said Hoeness, who was part of the 1974 World Cup-winning West Germany squad.

But Klinsmann stood by his assistant and the German Football Federation accepted his recommendation that Loew was a ready-made replacement.

His aim will be to harness the energy and excitement generated in the World Cup by young players like Lukas Podolski and Bastian Schweinsteiger and channel those qualities into a serious attempt to win the Euro 2008 crown.

Loew will come under intense scrutiny - no sooner had he been appointed, Kicker magazine was asking: "Can he handle it?"

Klinsmann has said he will be at the end of a phone line to offer advice, but Loew will face his first test, a friendly against Sweden on August 16, alone.



Brazilian defender Lucio signs an autograph for a fan on a national team jersey at a hotel in Porto Alegre, Brazil on Thursday.

Bayern in for Ribery

AFP, Berlin

The race to sign France star Franck Ribery is hotting up with Bayern Munich reportedly registering their interest Friday.

The 23-year-old Marseille forward had not even been capped before being called up to the France World Cup squad but his stock has sky-rocketed since the finals.

Already, before the tournament

began, French champions Lyon and Manchester United reportedly made enquiries about last season's French young player of the year.

But since the global showpiece event, Arsenal, Real Madrid and now Bayern are also allegedly in the hunt.

"He is a very interesting player," said Bayern coach Felix Magath in an interview with Bild newspaper.

"He had a great World Cup and really progressed last season at Marseille."

Marseille continue to insist that Ribery is not for sale with the club's principal shareholder Robert

Louis-Dreyfus saying the player is "untransferable".

But Bayern will not be easily dissuaded.

"Ribery really impressed us in the World Cup. He is an excellent dribbler, takes risks and is not afraid to get stuck in," added Bayern general manager Uli Hoeness.

The Bavarians have already added German young player of the year Lukas Podolski from Cologne in the close season and are chasing Manchester United's Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Rangers up for sale?

INTERNET, undated

Rangers owner David Murray today revealed he could sell the club within three years and has already had interest from potential buyers.

The tycoon, who took control at Ibrox in 1989, said he would only sell to someone prepared to invest more cash.

"I'm coming up for 20 years, and I think that will be enough for anybody," the 54-year-old entrepreneur told the Financial Times.

"We've had a couple of people speak to us tentatively, but I would only sell the club if it was somebody who could take it to a higher level."

"There's no point in selling Rangers to people who then can't invest more money."

Murray's portfolio of metals, mining, property and venture capital businesses have made him Scotland's fifth richest man, worth £650 million.

The founder-owner of Murray International Holdings, he bought Rangers for £6 million in 1989.

One fans group said he would be missed by the vast majority of the club's followers if he sold up.

John Macmillan, secretary of the Rangers Supporters Association, said: "I am confident Mr Murray would only sell to someone with the best interests of the club, its players and supporters at heart."

"It's true he has had his detractors who say he only took over Rangers for his own profile but he has invested lots of time and his own money in the club."

Stephen Smith, of the Rangers Supporters Trust, said: "Our big-

gest nightmare would be a Malcolm Glazer taking control at Ibrox."

"One man who might be interested is Sir Tom Hunter, he's known to be a big Rangers fan. But we don't want one unaccountable rich man replaced with another."

"David Murray owns 91.8% of the club, that's unhealthy, and whoever takes over we would like to see ownership radically overhauled and re-distributed."

Murray's time at the club will be best remembered for Rangers' nine-in-a-row championship wins between 1989-1997.

In 1989, he also signed Maurice Johnston, the first high-profile Catholic to play for the club since the Second World War.

But Murray was blamed by fans for the financial woes at the club which followed a spending spree during Dick Advocaat's spell as manager.

Croatia sack Kranjcar

REUTERS, Zagreb

Zlatko Kranjcar was sacked as Croatia's coach on Friday following a disappointing early exit at the World Cup finals in Germany, the state radio reported.

The national association's (HNS) 19-member executive committee voted unanimously to replace Kranjcar, the report said, adding that a new coach would be named in a week.

An HNS source told Reuters the FA was looking at a foreigner as a possible replacement.

The new coach will lead Croatia in the Euro 2008 qualifiers against England, Russia, Macedonia, Israel and Andorra.

Kranjcar, 49, took over in 2004 and enjoyed an excellent World Cup qualifying campaign, leading Croatia to the top of their group, ahead of Sweden and Bulgaria.

Before the World Cup finals, Kranjcar voiced confidence his squad should progress from its group, which included Brazil, Australia and Japan, but he failed to post a single victory.

Although Croatia displayed little spark and scored only two goals in three games, Kranjcar insisted they had been physically and tactically well prepared and refused to take any blame for the failure saying "we just weren't fortunate".

He had also engaged in a war of words with the media, which accused him of favouring his son Niko as the team's playmaker, despite his poor form.



A recent photo shows Croatia's outgoing coach Zlatko Kranjcar before the start of a World Cup match in Stuttgart.