



Barcelona superstar Ronaldinho (R) and teammate Lionel Messi (L) talk during a training session at the University Stadium in Monterrey, Mexico on Wednesday. Barcelona are scheduled to take on Mexico's Tigres in a friendly today.

## Zlatan likely to leave Juve

AFP, Rome

The agent of Zlatan Ibrahimovic admitted on Wednesday that the Swedish striker could be the next high-profile player to leave scandal-hit Italian club Juventus.

"It's very probable that 'Ibra' will leave Turin," Mino Raiola told Italian radio station 'Radio, Radio'.

Raiola ruled out the possibility of Ibrahimovic being loaned out.

"I would certainly exclude the possibility of him going out on loan," he said.

"It would be an unlikely solution for a player of his calibre."

If he decides to leave, Ibrahimovic will follow French midfielder Patrick Vieira, World Cup-winning captain Fabio Cannavaro, Brazilian midfielder Emerson, French defender Lilian Thuram and utility player Gianluca Zambrotta out of Juventus.

The exodus was triggered by Juventus' relegation to Serie B with a 17-point penalty for the start of next season after they were found guilty of match-fixing.

The club were also stripped of the title they won last season.

Ibrahimovic, an established Sweden international but who had a dreadful World Cup, joined Juventus from Dutch giants Ajax in August, 2004.

## Milan to face Red Star



REUTERS, London

AC Milan will play Red Star Belgrade in the third qualifying round of the Champions League after being given a reprieve by UEFA on Wednesday.

The six-times European champions were initially thrown out of the flagship competition after being found guilty in the Serie A match-fixing scandal, only to have their punishment reduced by an Italian soccer appeals court.

Red Star, themselves former champions of Europe, completed a 4-0 aggregate victory over Irish side Cork City after a 3-0 victory in the Serbian capital on Wednesday.

Two close-range headers by international striker Nikola Zigic and a superb volley from midfielder Dejan Milovanovic handed Red Star a comfortable victory.

Dynamo Kiev and Fenerbahce will meet for a place in the lucrative group stages after crushing lowly opposition on Wednesday.

Kiev beat Latvian champions Metalurgs 4-0 to seal an 8-1 aggregate victory, Ruslan Rotan scoring twice.

Turkish club Fenerbahce,

coached by Brazilian Zico, finished off B36 of the Faroe Islands in style, winning the away leg 5-0 for a 9-0 aggregate triumph.

Dinamo Zagreb will provide the opposition for last season's beaten finalists Arsenal after beating Lithuanians Ekranas 5-2 in Croatia, building on their 4-1 victory in the away leg.

Spartak Moscow squeezed into the third qualifying round on away goals after a 0-0 draw in the Russian capital against Moldovan champions Sheriff. The first leg had ended 1-1.

Spartak will now face Czech side Slovan Liberec.

Danish champion FC Copenhagen set up a third qualifying round clash with former champions Ajax after drawing 2-2 with Finnish side MyPa 47 having won 2-0 at home.

Scottish club Hearts are just one round away from the group phase after holding out for a 0-0 draw in Bosnia against Siroki Brijeg, protecting their 3-0 advantage from the first leg.

Levski Sofia kept alive their dream of becoming the first Bulgarian club to compete in the Champions League group stage when they beat Sioni Bolnisi of Georgia 2-0 at home for a 4-0 aggregate victory.

The first legs of the third qualifying round will be played on August 8-9 with the returns on August 22-23.

The 16 winners of the ties will join the 16 automatic qualifiers for the group stage that starts on September 12/13.

## Red carpet for Zidane red card

AFP, Buenos Aires

The red card that spelled the premature end to Zinedine Zidane's glittering career was presented to Argentine president Nestor Kirchner here on Wednesday.

Horatio Elizondo, the Argentine referee who plucked the red card out of his pocket after Zidane's infamous head-butt on Italy's Marco Materazzi, handed over the item of World Cup memorabilia after a one hour meeting with Kirchner at his presidential office.

"We spoke about the World Cup and he congratulated me," said Elizondo, who became the first referee to officiate at both the opening and closing matches at a World Cup.

Kirchner was evidently thrilled with the gift, playfully brandishing the tool of Zidane's downfall which had been autographed by Elizondo in the direction of cameramen as if he was booking them.

Zidane saw red after taunts from Materazzi near the end of extra time in the July 9 final in Berlin with the final deadlocked at 1-1.

Barcelona's US tour set to net millions

AFP, Barcelona

European and Spanish champions Barcelona expect to net around four million euros (4.8 million dollars) from their tour of the United States and Mexico, Spanish media reported on Wednesday.

With Brazilian world player of the year Ronaldinho in their star-studded ranks Barca expect to rake in around a million euros for each of their four matches.

After facing Mexican league opposition in Monterrey, then across the border in Los Angeles and Houston, Barca will take on New York Red Bulls, regional TV station TV3 said.

Barca, who as well as Ronaldinho have Mexico skipper Rafael Marquez in the squad, headed off Tuesday and will complete their north American tour on August 12 with their final game in New York, just two weeks before the new Liga programme begins.

In the season just ended Barca made a 33 million euros net profit on turnover of 259 million euros and the club hopes to push the latter figure to 300 million in the coming year.

Last week, the organisers of their friendlies tour said more than 100,000 tickets have been sold to see the Catalan club in the United States.

Bitter rivals Real Madrid are also due in the United States this summer as the world's richest club seek to bolster their Stateside profile after concentrating on their Asian franchising in recent years since England star David Beckham joined in 2003.

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## Real still hopeful of Kaka



REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has said he is still hopeful of completing his election promise to sign AC Milan's Brazilian midfielder Kaka, despite the player saying he was happy where he was.

"It is true that when I presented myself as a candidate I had this objective and (coach) Fabio Capello and (sports director) Predrag Mijatovic said he would do very well for us," Calderon told Real Madrid television on Thursday.

"Mijatovic told me he was confident he would come and I continue hoping it will be so. It is another thing to make it happen but I still believe it is possible."

Kaka signed a contract extension

with Milan until 2011 in June and has told the Serie A club's website he is content and that he never said he wanted to a move to Real.

A week ago Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani said the club would not negotiate with Real for the player.

Milan were involved in Italy's match-fixing scandal and will start next season with an eight-point deduction in the league.

They have been allowed to compete in the Champions League and will play Red Star Belgrade in the third qualifying round next week. If Kaka plays, he would become ineligible to play for Real in Europe this season, if he moved.

Mijatovic told a news conference on Wednesday: "Italian football has had problems but it seems as though Milan will retain their top-flight status. This is a setback to our

players but we have other strategies that could work."

"He is a great player but we want players who can play in every competition. The Champions League is very important to us. We will see what happens in the next few days."

Real have already signed Italian defender Fabio Cannavaro, Brazilian midfielder Emerson and Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy since Calderon became president at the beginning of July.

Capello has said he was expecting five signings. Spanish media report Real are also interested in bringing Arsenal forward Jose Antonio Reyes to the Bernabeu.

Mijatovic added: "Reyes is a player with a lot of talent but we are focusing on other priorities at present. We still have a month until the end of the transfer window so we should remain calm."

## A new beginning for Argentine football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

An influx of foreign players and the homecoming of three veteran internationals will breathe new life into the Argentine championship which kicks off on Friday.

More than 20 foreign players, led by former Costa Rica striker Paulo Wanchope and Paraguay's impressive World Cup goalkeeper Aldo Bobadilla, have been signed by the 20 clubs.

Wanchope has joined Rosario Central while Bobadilla will take over at Boca Juniors from Argentina's World Cup goalkeeper Roberto Abundanzieri, who has left for Spain's Getafe.

Meanwhile, former Argentina internationals Juan Sebastian Veron, Cristian Gonzalez and Ariel Ortega all return to the clubs where they began their careers.

Veron, 31 and still with plenty to offer, will line up with Estudiantes, Gonzalez joins Wanchope in Rosario and Ortega goes back to River Plate after nearly two years with Newell's Old Boys.

As usual, two separate league

championships, known as the Apertura and Clausura, will be played in the 2006/7 season.

The 20 teams meet each other once in each tournament and there is no overall champion.

Boca, the country's most fanatically supported club, will be the team to beat after winning both championships last season.

However, Diego Maradona's favourite team will have to find a new coach to replace Alfio Basile, who has been appointed as the new coach of Argentina.

Basile, who took over with the club at a low ebb just over one year ago, will leave Boca on September 14.

The main challenge, inevitably, will come from Boca's great rivals River Plate under former Argentina captain and coach Daniel Passarella.

River, recently knocked out of the Libertadores Cup by Paraguay's Libertad, have now gone four championships -- or two seasons -- without winning a title.

Meanwhile, there is renewed hope at the other three major clubs,

including Racing Club and Independiente, whose stadiums lie only 300 metres apart in the industrial neighbourhood of Avellaneda.

Independiente will start afresh under new coach Jorge Burruchaga, scorer of the winning goal when Argentina beat West Germany in the 1986 World Cup final, who has finally returned to the club where he was raised.

Coach Reinaldo Merlo is back at Racing, whom he led to the 2001 Apertura title to end a wait of 35 years for a major trophy.

Former Argentina captain Oscar Ruggeri has taken a major clearout at San Lorenzo, the other of the big five clubs, where a dozen players have left. Newcomers include Peruvian striker Roberto Jimenez and Bolivia's Joaquin Botero.

Other possible contenders include Velez Sarsfield, winners of the 2004/5 Clausura title, and Estudiantes, coached by former Argentina captain Diego Simeone.

## Pak trio on the mend

AFP, Leeds

Pakistan head into the third Test against England starting at Headingley here Friday still without the services of injured pacemen Shoaib Akhtar (ankle), Mohammad Asif (elbow) and Navedul Hasan (groin).

The tourists were severely handicapped in the drawn series opener at Lord's and England's crushing innings and 120 run second Test win at Old Trafford by the absence of their three leading quicks.

And the trio will be missing again for a match Pakistan must win to have any chance of winning the four-Test series heading into the final Test at The Oval starting on August 17.

But premier paceman Akhtar is due to play a match for Birmingham League side Berkswell against St George's in the English Midlands this weekend and Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer said both Asif and Naved, recovering in Pakistan, were on the way back as well.

"Mohammad Asif went through a fitness test yesterday (Wednesday). He bowled eight overs pain free. Shoaib Akhtar plays his first game in the Birmingham League on Saturday and we'll see how he comes through that."

"And Naved is due to start bowling again in the next couple of days," former England all-rounder Woolmer also told reporters at Headingley here Thursday.

Although Naved, who starred for Sussex earlier in the season where fellow Pakistan star Mushtaq Ahmed is still playing, was ruled out of the four-Test series, Woolmer indicated he could yet return for the subsequent five-match one-day contest against England.

"There is a thought he (Naved) might return to Sussex and work under the Sussex team and see if we can get him fit there. They did bring this up through Mushy and suggest that might be the case. We will certainly look at that."

"But he definitely won't make the fourth Test match and nor should he because he hasn't bowled for some time"

Turning to Asif, Woolmer added: "He's got another test today (Thursday) and if he comes through that he'll play against West Indies A in Shenley (a two day match starting on August 12 which is Pakistan's final fixture before the fourth Test)."

And Woolmer said Akhtar would

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NOT FAR AWAY? England cricket captain Michael Vaughan watches his teammates practise at Headingley in Leeds on Thursday ahead of today's third England-Pakistan Test. Vaughan is recovering from a knee injury.



Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich (L) and an unidentified man walk off the field as coach Jose Mourinho (C) instructs a player at a training session at the UCLA campus in Los Angeles on Wednesday.

PHOTO: INTERNET