



HOPE I CAN LAND ON MY FEET: Brazilian club Internacional striker Alex performs a somersault after scoring against Libertad of Paraguay during their Libertadores Cup semifinal match in Porto Alegre on Thursday. PHOTO: INTERNET

Pope retires from int'l football

REUTERS, Hartford
USA Defender Eddie Pope called time on his international career on Thursday.

"After having the opportunity to play in my third World Cup and taking some time to reflect with my family, I felt like it was the right moment to say goodbye to the national team," Pope said in a statement.

Pope, 32, is the third American to retire from the international stage since the US failed to progress to the knockout stage at the World Cup. Captain Claudio Reyna and striker Brian McBride have also bowed out.

Pope was a regular fixture in the centre of the US defence and was on the 1998, 2002 and 2006 World Cup squads.

He appeared in 82 games and scored eight goals for the US since winning his first cap against Trinidad and Tobago in a 1996 World Cup qualifier.

"Eddie Pope is arguably the finest defender this country has ever produced," said former US coach Bruce Arena.

"Eddie has always let his play do the talking, serving as a role model for a generation of defenders."

Pope has featured in Major League Soccer for 11 years and won three league championships with D.C. United. He moved to MetroStars in 2003 before joining Real Salt Lake in 2005.

Inter target wantaway Crespo

INTERNET, undated

Internazionale coach Roberto Mancini has confirmed that Hernan Crespo is one of several strikers he is considering.

With Serie A to kick-off on September 10 Mancini is well aware that he needs to add a goalscorer to his ranks but is refusing to panic about a lack of activity thus far.

The young tactician believes that he will be able to land a proven goalscorer before the new campaign and has spoken about those within his sights.

Juventus duo David Trezeguet and Zlatan Ibrahimovic are major targets, with Fiorentina's Luca Toni and Chelsea's Hernan Crespo also being considered.

Crespo's future at Stamford Bridge has been thrown into real doubt following the player's insistence that he wants to return to Italy, and Internazionale now seem a realistic option for the Argentine.

"At this moment no-one wants to sell, and it's difficult foreseeing what will happen or who I prefer between Toni, Ibrahimovic, Trezeguet and Crespo," confirmed Mancini.

"I am not worried, we are evaluating the different situations and at the end a striker will arrive."

"The Swede (Ibrahimovic) is different than the others and he has technical abilities difficult to find in other players."

"The other three are finishers, fundamental for any line-up."

"Toni? I don't comment on what he does. Crespo? He's 31 and surely isn't done for."

Exodus hits Mexican championship

REUTERS, Mexico City

The Mexican championship, previously immune to the talent drain which has hit domestic football in the rest of Latin America, kicks off at the weekend amid a harsh new reality.

Recent improvements in the performances of the Mexican national team have attracted the interest of European clubs, who have started snapping up the country's top players.

When Mexico left for the World Cup, only four of their 23-man squad were based abroad.

The total has more than doubled in the month since they lost 2-1 to Argentina in the second round, with defenders Ricardo Osorio and Carlos Salcido, team captain Pavel Pardo and strikers Omar Bravo and Francisco Fonseca all

moving abroad. Mexico's World Cup coach Ricardo La Volpe has said Mexican players need the experience of playing in Europe if the country wants to become a major soccer power.

But it remains to be seen what effect the new phenomenon will have on the championships which has traditionally been an importer rather than exporter of players.

As usual, the 2006-07 season will be divided into two separate championships, the Apertura and Clausura.

In each tournament, the 18 teams play each other once but are divided into three groups. The top two in each group qualify for the knockout stages along with the two best of the remainder.

Relegation is decided over three seasons, or six tournaments, meaning that a team can reach the quarter-finals while still fighting against the drop.

Provincial clubs Toluca and

Pachuca won the two championships played last year and the big city teams from Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey, will be determined to bounce back.

Of Mexico City's quartet, America appear the best placed to make a challenge although they will be missing playmaker Cuauhtemoc Blanco because of injury for the early rounds.

Luis Fernando Tena has replaced Manuel Lapuente as coach and the Eagles have signed Paraguayan forwards Salvador Cabanas and Nelson Cuevas although they have sold captain Pardo to VfB Stuttgart.

America are away to San Luis, runners-up in the 2005/6 Clausura tournament, on Saturday.

Cruz Azul have sold Mexico striker Fonseca to Benfica while UNAM will this time be more worried about relegation after three disastrous tournaments.

Brazilian Ricardo Ferretti is

their third coach since Sanchez resigned last October.

Atlante are considered the ugly ducklings in the capital, routinely attracting only a handful of fans to the giant Azteca stadium.

Monterrey have retained coach Miguel Herrera despite their poor showing last time around while neighbours UNAM have signed coach Jose Luis Trejo, who led Pachuca to the title in the last tournament.

Former Mexico coach Enrique Meza has replaced Trejo at Pachuca, who start the defence of their crown at home to Cruz Azul on Sunday.

Guadalajara, the country's most popular club and the only one not to field foreigners, are likely to face Toluca with their reserves on Sunday.

Oddly, the Chivas also have a friendly against European champions Barcelona in Los Angeles on the same day.

The story of Obi Mikel

THE GUARDIAN

Hunter S Thompson wrote about "a very ominous assignment -- with overtones of extreme personal danger" in a book that drew its inspiration from a meeting he attended in the Beverly Hills Hotel.

The gonzo journalist was not likely to have been uppermost on John Obi Mikel's mind when he gave his first media interview for Chelsea in that opulent hotel, but the surroundings were appropriate for a player whose young life has already brought enormous drama.

Bound by the terms of the confidentiality agreement involved in his 16-million-pound transfer to Stamford Bridge, it is a subject the 19-year-old Mikel, recognised by FIFA as one of the finest teenage players on the planet, is not permitted to discuss.

But if the full story about the transfer wrangle that took him to Chelsea is ever told, it will make a script fit for a movie in the Hollywood studios nearby.

There were allegations of death threats and of kidnapping as the young player absconded from the Norwegian club who had sold him to Manchester United in a clandestine deal. But United were unequivocal in their condemnation of what they believed to be Chelsea's intervention.

No punishments have been inflicted on United, Oslo or the agents involved in the unseemly saga and FIFA was quick to drop a politically sensitive investigation when Chelsea took him. He has evidently undergone a distressing ordeal which people of his age should not have to endure, but he does not dwell on negatives.

"Mentally it made me strong and I learned a lot of things from that -- how to trust people, for instance. I learned a lot of things from it. I'm very happy it's all ended like this now so I can now play for the club of my dreams."

That Chelsea fit that description for Mikel is more credible than his

age the youngster now that he has emerged from the dog days of an incipient career. Training with Chelsea's superstars -- his "idols" -- is, after all, a far cry from his exertions in Nigeria when, after he quit Lyn Oslo, he was prevented from playing while FIFA investigated the circumstances of United's 4-million-

in 2004 and would not renege on his word.

This hope prevented Mikel's spirit from being crushed. "For all I knew it was definitely going to be like this, ending happily with me coming to Chelsea because it's where I want to play," he said. "It's where I've been wanting to play for a long time. I came for trials with the club; I enjoyed it, it was good. Everybody was lovely, the players and staff, the manager, all nice people. That's why I wanted to be here. I'm trying to keep working hard and respecting everybody, the players, manager and staff."

But the Premiership champions had to pay a heavy price. Roman Abramovich might seem like football's Mammon incarnate but the 12 million pounds to be paid to United and 4 million to Lyn, in equal instalments -- one up front, one at the end of a year -- may be his greatest extravagance to date for Chelsea.

Mikel has played with distinction for Nigeria's senior team in the African Nations Cup but there can be no guarantee he will settle in London. "It's a huge amount of money but I'm here now to work hard and give my best for the club and hopefully I will," he said.

Mourinho hinted that there were people around the young player who might not have his best interests at heart. "I just wish him and the people around him can help him to be a good person because he has the ability to be a real star," said the manager. "In the next couple of years he could become one of the best players in the world."

That is a bold claim, but the equanimity of a teenager whose career has already taken him on a savage journey to the heart of the football dream suggests he has what it takes.



JOHN OBI MIKEL

claim that he grew up in Nigeria a fan of the club, which he rather undermined with a self-conscious giggle. He is obviously intelligent, bright enough to recognise the irony of his public-relations dissemblance.

It seems that little can discour-

age him. Throughout the saga Mikel was given reassurances by Jose Mourinho. The Chelsea manager had determined to sign the midfielder after being seduced by his talents during his six-week trial at the old Harlington training ground

Laporta launches re-election bid

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Joan Laporta has challenged other candidates to step up and present their ideas as he launched his bid for re-election to the Barcelona presidency on Thursday.

"There are some people who have been saying they have everything prepared, well now is their moment," Laporta told a news conference.

The lawyer admitted he may have made some mistakes while president but felt it was "difficult to present an alternative model for the club."

So far only Francesc Linan Serra, who has failed on four previous occasions to collect the signa-

tures necessary to become an official candidate, has said he will stand against Laporta.

Former vice-president Sandro Rossell, and Jordi Majo and Josep Maria Minguella who stood in the 2003 election, have said they will not join the race.

Potential candidates have complained about the scheduling of the electoral campaign during the holidays, throwing up the possibility that Laporta could be left unopposed.

Laporta won the 2003 election promising to buy David Beckham from Manchester United. Once elected, the move never materialised but he did bring Brazilian forward Ronaldinho to the club instead.

Laporta brushed off media speculation linking the Brazilian with a possible move to Italy:

"Ronaldinho is very happy here and I don't think we need to be worried about him leaving."

Barca won the Primera Liga title in 2005 and 2006, and crowned that with the Champions League title last May.

But Laporta and his board were forced to resign on July 26 after a judge upheld a complaint from three club members who said he had already served his four-year tenure as president.

He ruled that, according to the club's statutes, the year ran from July to June, and that since Laporta had officially taken power on June 22, 2003 the eight days before the end of that month constituted his first year in office.

Laporta's four-year term would, therefore, have expired on June 30 this year.

O'Neill set for Villa hot seat

Football

AFP, Birmingham

Martin O'Neill is almost certain to be named the new manager of crisis-hit Aston Villa, according to a series of reports.

The highly-regarded former Leicester and Celtic boss still had to work out a few details on his contract but was expected to be confirmed in his new job at a press conference.

Describing it as "the worst-kept secret in football", the Birmingham Mail newspaper said the Northern Irish manager would take charge with immediate effect from Friday.

It would give O'Neill just two weeks to prepare the club -- manager-less and in near chaos amid complex takeover talks -- for the start of the new English Premiership season.

His first task will be to lead the club's pre-season tour to Germany and the Netherlands, beginning at the weekend.

O'Neill, 54, has been the fans' overwhelming favourite to take over from David O'Leary, who left last month following an internal investigation into the publication of a statement criticising the club, allegedly put together by players.

O'Neill worked miracles at lowly Leicester before winning three Scottish Premiership titles in five

years at Celtic, also guiding them to a UEFA Cup final.

He left football in May 2005 to look after his wife, who was being treated for cancer.

Aston Villa are currently in a state of flux, with veteran chairman Doug Ellis considering four separate takeover bids, the most promising of which appears to be one from US billionaire Randy Lerner, owner of the Cleveland Browns NFL franchise.

This has meant the club has conducted almost no transfer activity over the summer -- leaving O'Neill with a great deal of work in the next two weeks.

'Ronaldo sticking with United'

Football

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo, who has been in England for his part in Wayne Rooney's sending off at the 2006 World Cup, is staying put at Manchester United, assistant manager Carlos Queiroz said Friday.

"Cristiano Ronaldo is popular with our club and its fans. The club is used to our players being the target of some dispute when they face other big clubs in England," he told state-run Portuguese radio RDP.

"The circumstances that surrounded the player after the tourna-

ment were delicate but the reality of a club is not the reality of a national squad."

Ronaldo's future at Old Trafford has been in doubt after he said he wanted to leave England to play in Spain because of the backlash he was facing from some English fans.

The 21-year-old has since said he would be willing to stay at Manchester United but press reports continue to link him to a move to either Spain or Italy. Queiroz rejected the reports as "speculation".

"There are two different worlds. There is the real world and there is the world of media speculation," he said.

Manchester United's Rooney was ejected during the second half of Portugal's win over England in the quarter-finals of the World Cup after he stomped on Chelsea's Portuguese defender Ricardo Carvalho.

Ronaldo rushed to the referee and appeared to encourage him to send off Rooney, angering England fans.

Portugal went on to win in a penalty shootout as Ronaldo scored the decisive spot kick.

Ronaldo joined Manchester United in August 2003 from Sporting Lisbon for 12.2 million pounds. He is under contract with the club until 2010.

Toni pleads for Viola exit

Football

AFP, Rome

Unsettled striker Luca Toni is pleading with Fiorentina to let him go following the Serie A club's exclusion from the Champions League for match-fixing.

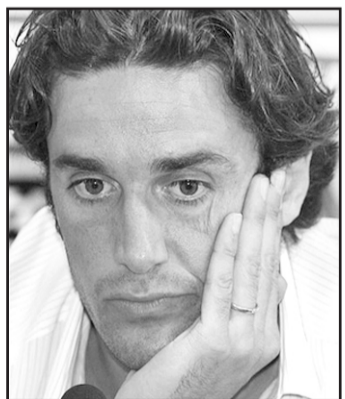
The Florence outfit were denied entry into the third qualifying round for their part in rigging matches in the 2004-05 season, and they were also handed a 19-point penalty for the start of the new campaign.

Serie A's leading scorer last season with 31 goals and a World Cup winner with Italy last month, Toni is desperate to play Champions League football but refutes claims his only motivation for wanting to leave is money.

"I've received many offers from important clubs that can compete for major trophies and they've offered me three times what I'm earning now," said the 29-year-old forward, who joined Fiorentina from

Palermo in July of last year for a fee of 10 million euros (12.8 million dollars).

"Many people have remarked that it's just about money, but I



LUCA TONI

gained success late in my career and I want to make the most of what is left of it.

"I got into the Champions

League with Fiorentina but we cannot take part, and what's more we have a 19-point handicap for next season.

"When will I play in the Champions League here? Maybe in two or three years' time, when my contract runs out."

"The president (Andrea Della Valle) has to understand my ambitions. I've heard he doesn't want to see me, but it's not right to treat me this way."

"We need to find a solution that suits everybody."

Toni's professional career began with Modena in 1994 before brief spells with Treviso and Vicenza, where he played Serie A football for the first time.

He then joined Brescia where he played for two seasons, supported in attack by Italian legend Roberto Baggio.

Toni signed for Palermo in 2003 and helped the club win promotion from Serie B in his first season.

Albion reject United offer

Football

AFP, London

West Bromwich Albion have rejected a 2.5-million-pound (4.7 million dollar, 3.7 million euro) bid from Manchester United for Polish goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak, saying they will only agree if striker Giuseppe Rossi moves the opposite way.

"At this moment in time, selling Tomasz to United is not a viable option," West Brom chairman Jeremy Peace was quoted as saying by the BBC on Friday.

"It would severely weaken our squad at a time when we are trying to

strengthen it for a promotion push."

West Bromwich were relegated from the Premiership last season, and are trying to hang on to their key players as they aim for an instant return to the top flight.

Peace said the only way West Bromwich would sell the 24-year-old goalkeeper would be if United let 19-year-old Italian striker Rossi join the Baggies on a season-long loan.

However, Sir Alex Ferguson is reluctant to lose Rossi for the season, especially after star striker Ruud van Nisteroy has been sold.

"It means if we sold Tomasz to United, without Rossi coming in return, it would potentially cause us more problems without solving any -

- despite the receipt of cash," said Peace.

West Bromwich have now turned down three offers from United for Kuszczak, who joined West Bromwich in July 2004 from Hertha Berlin.

"This will come as a disappointment to Tomasz who has indicated to us he would like to join United," Peace.

"But it is the board's job to do what is best for this football club and we will not sell Tomasz unless the deal suits us."

"Because of the way this football club is structured, we are under no pressure to sell anyone. Tomasz will only be sold if it is in our interests to do so."