



(L to R) Young guns Bastian Schweinsteiger and Lukas Podolski, Bremen trio Tim Borowski, Torsten Frings and Miroslav Klose, Dortmund recruit Alexander Frei and Hamburg's Dutch star Rafael van der Vaart will all look to leave their mark on the forthcoming Bundesliga season, which kicks off today.

PHOTOS: AFP

Ibrahimovic becomes a Nerazzurri

AFP, Rome

Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic has signed a four-year deal with Inter Milan after a 24.8 million euro (31.9 million dollar) agreement was reached by the club with Italian rivals Juventus on Thursday.

The 24-year-old, who joined the club two years ago, has signed a deal which will take him up until June 30, 2010.

"Juventus have reached agreement with Inter Milan for the signing of Zlatan Ibrahimovic for 24.8 million euros payable over three years," the buying club said in a statement.

Following the sale, Juventus coach Didier Deschamps, the former France World Cup winning captain, said the Swede's departure would be his side's last.

However, it is not the first time the disgraced deposed champions have made such a claim.

Juventus had claimed after the sale of France captain Patrick Vieira to Inter Milan last week that no more players would be allowed to leave.

But Ibrahimovic demanded out in the wake of Juve's demotion to Serie B - along with a 17-point penalty for the coming season - for their part in Italy's match-fixing scandal.

Juventus were also stripped of the league titles they won last season (2005/06) and the season before and barred from the Champions League.

France defender Lilian Thuram and Italy full-back Gianluca Zambrotta were the first to jump ship, to Barcelona, quickly followed by new Real Madrid pair Emerson, the Brazil midfielder, and Italy's World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro.

On Wednesday, Mauro Camoranesi's agent also claimed his player wants to leave and Deschamps will have a fight on his hands to keep hold of other sought-after star names such as Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon and France forward David Trezeguet.

"It's not because one leaves that everyone else has to go too," said Deschamps.

"Buffon has already chosen, he will stay at Juventus even if an

interesting offer comes in. "And concerning Trezeguet, I know him well. We will find a solution that satisfies him."

Ibrahimovic becomes Inter Milan's fourth signing for the new season after Vieira, Fabio Grosso (Palermo) and Hernan Crespo (Chelsea).

Ibrahimovic joined Juventus from Dutch side Ajax in 2004, scoring 26 goals in the past two years.



ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC ... confirms his switch to Inter Milan.

Terry named Eng captain

REUTERS, London

Chelsea skipper John Terry has been appointed as England's new captain, the Football Association said on Thursday.

Terry takes over the armband after David Beckham stepped down from the role in the wake of England's World Cup quarter-final defeat on penalties by Portugal last month.

Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard, also tipped for the job, has been appointed vice-captain.

Terry, 25 and capped 29 times, has helped Chelsea win two consecutive Premier League titles and established himself with England as a first-choice central defender.

England's new coach Steve McClaren told the FA's Web site: "Choosing a captain is one of the most important decisions a coach has to make."

"I'm certain I've got the right man in John Terry. I'm convinced he will prove to be one of the best captains England has ever had."

England's next game is a friendly against European champions Greece in Manchester next Wednesday.

Low springs no surprises

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany coach Joachim Low remained loyal to his country's World Cup squad on Thursday when naming his first group of 21-players for the friendly against Sweden on August 16 in Gelsenkirchen.

Only Bayern Munich's Oliver Khan, who announced his international retirement after Germany's third place finish on home soil, and injured duo Per Mertesacker and Robert Huth have been left out from last month's World Cup 23.

Instead, MSV Mainz defender Manuel Friedrich has been drafted

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1

Mixed times for Die Bundesliga

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



Football is making a swift return to Germany. And no, it's not the World Cup. Germany or Deutschland as they themselves call it, resided on the forefront of every football followers' mind this summer as the German's hosted the World Cup with typical efficiency and a mixture of élan and creativity that none knew they had. Carried on the crest of a wave, the somewhat shoddy German team made it into the semi-finals of the tournament and lost out to eventual champions Italy.

Such was the level of public euphoria and togetherness that many regarded it as the greatest occasion of public unity since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the formation of unified Germany. For a day less than a full month, Germany itself lived and died with the exploits of Juergen Klinsmann and his band of merry men. The outpouring of national emotion was immense for a country for whom national pride itself and identification with the flag remains a sketchy ideal. The World Cup may have, forever, changed the nation of Germany. However, all that is now almost a distant memory.

For the 'real' football fans, the festival starts today. Die Bundesliga has returned.

As much as most of the adulating public would like to carry the summer euphoria into the new season, there remain more than a few doubts as to what this year will bring. And rightfully so.

The primary reason is simple. Most of the beer guzzling and

partying fans that we saw on TV this summer were not your 'real' fans.

By real, we mean, that they would not necessarily turn up under adverse weather conditions to watch a relegation scrap or even an obscure mid table tie, say Hannover against Wolfsburg. So the image of the football loving fan engraved in your mind is at least partly flawed.

Secondly, and more importantly, as inviting and enticing as the brilliant sunshine and the state of the art stadiums of Germany may have seemed this summer, most of the foreign stars and the most famous home grown one failed to get the message. They left and that has leaves the league in quite a limbo.

Make no mistake, the Bundesliga made some big name signings, but to be honest they were big names only by Bundesliga standards. The much lauded youngster, Vincent Kompany moved to Hamburg. Swiss hero Alexander Frei switched from Rennes to Dortmund and Brazilian starlet Diego also swapped the sun of Portugal for the river of Weser and Werder Bremen. Good players, all of them, but none are really in the top bracket for any league. Mind you though, they may yet turn out to

be magnificent bargain buys. More of that later.

The losses though far outweigh the gains. Tomas Rosicky and Jan Koller, both Czech and both contracted to Dortmund switched allegiances. While the giant striker was lured to the tax haven of Monaco, the slight playmaker Rosicky moved to chilly London where he will link up with Arsene Wenger and the Gunners in the superb Emirates Stadium. Johan Micoud, long a favourite of the Bremen faithful and one of the last of the breed of silky playmakers, left for Bordeaux, where he aims to finish. Dmitar Berbatov also moved to the Premiership. The Leverkusen star, one of the most technically gifted players the Bundesliga could boast of and a natural goalscorer has already caught the eye at Tottenham Hotspur. Ze Roberto, the skillful midfielder and star performer for Brazil ended his long stay at Bayern. Although he has yet to find a club, there will be no shortage of suitors for the versatile midfielder. And last but not least, Michael Ballack also went in search for a new challenge; the midfielder completing a free transfer to Chelsea after two consecutive league and cup doubles with Bayern Munich. He said he was seeking a new challenge but at least half the Bayern faithful will tell you otherwise.

But enough of the negatives. Why is the Bundesliga worth watching? For one, statistic wise, it is still the most entertaining of the big leagues in Europe. Last season, the Germans eclipsed all the other leagues in terms of goal per game. The average 2.81, although down from the season before was still quite a bit more than the next in line, which is (hold your horses) the Serie A with

2.61 goals per 90 minutes. (How the world has changed!). The Ligue 1 was the biggest culprit with a 2.13 average while Spain and England squared off near each other with the former 2.46 to the latter's 2.48.

And that is not all. The Bundesliga was also the best supported league in Europe last season with an average of 39,000 fans watching ever game.

The matches are entertaining, the quality and competitiveness within the league is very high (although Bayern are still a bit way above the rest the gap is closing rapidly). If you can sacrifice a bit of individuality and class, and forgive the odd glaring error here and there, then there is nothing more entertaining than the Bundesliga.

So with booming attendances and high goals per game there is not much more that a league could want.

The real question that rears itself is how well the Bundesliga will accommodate without a truly world class name.

In light of the recent spate of signing from Italian clubs (none to Germany), Kicker magazine somewhat ironically said, "The world-class players don't move to the Bundesliga. But maybe they are already here?"

By which they were pointing out the players who under Juergen Klinsmann's tutelage had become atleast national if not international stars. Step forward Young Player of the World Cup, Lukas Podolski, Golden Boot winner Miroslav Klose, Bastian Schweinsteiger and the man Pele considered the find of the tournament: Phillip Lahm.

Only Michael Ballack has deserted Germany and he did so before the World Cup. But nine of the 11 players who took Germany

SEE PAGE 22 COL 2

Vieri quits Sampdoria

AFP, Rome

Weary Italian striker Christian Vieri is without a club after quitting Sampdoria following just one month with the Serie A side.

Vieri, 33, agreed a one-year contract with the Genoa-based club in July but threw in the towel without even playing a game after admitting he no longer feels motivated.

A statement from the club said that after a meeting between club bosses and Vieri "both parties agreed that the professional basis on which the agreement was signed no longer exists".

Vieri played for Monaco in the French league last year but missed much of the season because of a knee injury.

Capped 49 times for Italy, Vieri played just seven French league games since January scoring three goals and was not selected for the World Cup.

The striker has scored 130 goals in his career notably with Juventus (1996-97), Lazio (1998-1999) and Inter Milan (1999-2005).

He was the top Italian league scorer in 2003 with Inter Milan.

Vieri also played for Atletico Madrid, scoring 24 goals in as many matches in 1997-1998, finishing the season as the top scorer in the Primera Liga.

Gonzalez spares L'pool blushes

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool came from behind to defeat Israel's Maccabi Haifa 2-1 in a tense Champions League qualifier here Wednesday thanks to goals from new signings Craig Bellamy and Mark Gonzalez.

Chilean winger Gonzalez popped up with a goal two minutes from time, just moments after coming on as a substitute in his Liverpool debut to give the English side a precious advantage to take into the away leg.

But Haifa -- whose players have spent the past few weeks living in hotels as their home city gets bombarded by Hezbollah rockets fired from nearby Lebanon -- very nearly forced what would have been a famous draw.

Haifa took the lead on half an hour through Brazilian midfielder Gustavo Boccoli, before home debutant Bellamy equalised, seizing on Momo Sissoko's blocked shot to fire into the top corner.

Haifa delighted their tiny knot of

noisy, green-shirted fans with some dogged defence, Argentinian striker Roberto Colautti even coming close to re-taking the lead after 15 minutes of the second half.

As Anfield grew increasingly anxious, Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez threw on Luis Garcia for Bolo Zenden, and then England striker Peter Crouch, surprisingly left on the bench for a one-man attack, replaced Bellamy.

Finally, Gonzalez was sent on with five minutes remaining, and scored a dramatic 88th-minute winner, firing high into the roof of the net after latching onto a Xabi Alonso cross.

The victory gives Liverpool one foot in the main draw of the Champions League, worth an estimated 12 million pounds (22.8 million dollars) in extra revenue.

The "away" leg will be played at a neutral venue with either Kiev or Cyprus in the running to host, after UEFA ruled that it was too dangerous to hold a game in any part of Israel.

Benitez began the night fielding new signings Bellamy, a 6 million pound capture from Blackburn and winger Jermaine Pennant.

Although Bellamy was a lone

striker, with captain Steven Gerrard pushing up with Pennant and Zenden on the wings, the early pressure was all from Liverpool and the Kop faithful perhaps sensed an easy night.

It was not to be -- just before half an hour had gone, Haifa exchanged some neat passes before Colautti, once of Boca Juniors, beat the offside trap to release fellow South American Boccoli.

The Brazilian, whose 12 goals from midfield last season helped make him Israel's player of year, advanced coolly to Jose Reina and finished crisply to the joy of the several hundred noisy, green-shirted Haifa fans who had made the trip from Israel.

The goal spurred Liverpool into action and they struck less than four minutes later.

Pennant, whose pace and skills tormented Haifa left back Haim Magrashvili all evening, again sprinted past the defence and cut back a pass to Sissoko.

The midfielder's shot was parried by Nir Davidovitch in the Haifa goal, and Bellamy stole in to fire the loose ball into the top corner.

SEE PAGE 22 COL 8



Maccabi Haifa goalkeeper Nir Davidovitch (L) and Dekel Keinan (R) close in on Liverpool striker Craig Bellamy during their Champions League qualifying match at Anfield on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP