

Uncertain futures for Kaka, Ronaldo

Football

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian icon Ronaldo and his international teammate Kaka are at the heart of a bizarre tug of war between Real Madrid and AC Milan.

Madrid coach Fabio Capello had claimed on Tuesday that Ronaldo would be going nowhere despite continued press speculation in Spain and Italy that he will be swapped for Milan's Kaka.

Capello said he was interested in acquiring Kaka but his president Ramon Calderon later came out on Cadena Ser radio to claim a swap deal was possible.

"Swapping Ronaldo for Kaka would not be a bad idea," said Calderon.

However, that stance contrasted sharply with his coach's position.

"Ronaldo is a great player who

interests every team but who wants to stay (at Real)," said Capello, the former Juventus coach.

"He is important for us because (Ruud) van Nistelrooy is the only other centre forward that we have while waiting for Ronaldo."

The Brazilian is currently recovering from a minor operation he underwent after the World Cup.

Van Nistelrooy joined the club last month from Manchester United in a 15 million euros (19 million dollars) deal after a public spat with Red Devils boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

But despite boasting attacking talent such as Italian Antonio Cassano and Brazilian pair Robinho and Julio Baptista, the Dutch 30-year-old is the only out-and-out forward at the club other than 'El Gordo', as Ronaldo is known in the Spanish capital.

Having added Mali international midfielder Mahamadou Diarra from French champions Lyon this week,

to bring his close season recruitment drive - which included former Juventus pair Fabio Cannavaro and Emerson - to four players, Capello has not given up hope of signing Kaka as well.

"Kaka is one of those rare players who can make the difference and for us he is a priority. But if he is not for sale, we cannot buy him."

But after qualifying for the group stages of the Champions League, by knocking out Red Star Belgrade over two legs, Milan complicated matters by claiming they wanted to sign Ronaldo.

"Adriano Galliani (Milan's vice president) is satisfied with the qualification for the Champions League and has officially approached Real Madrid to see if it is possible to acquire the Brazilian Ronaldo," said a club statement.

Galliani, when asked if he would be trying to sign the three-time World Player of the Year, added: "It's

possible, we'll see."

Ronaldo himself had alluded several times last season that he would not remain in the Spanish capital after the end of that campaign after often becoming the target for the fans' wrath during inept team displays.

Milan are not the only team interested in the Brazilian, though.

Ronaldo used to play for Milan's city rivals Inter and last week the Inter president Massimo Moratti said: "I respect and like Ronaldo and I would not be happy to see him go to the other Milan team."

However, Inter have already signed Argentine Hernan Crespo from Chelsea and Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic from Juventus and already have Ronaldo's international strike partner Adriano on their books.

Berbatov dazzles on home debut

AFP, London



Tottenham Hotspur's new boy Dimitar Berbatov scored one goal and set up the second on his Spurs home debut as they beat visitors Sheffield United 2-0 at White Hart Lane here on Tuesday.

The Bulgaria striker scored in the seventh minute and was instrumental in the second just 10 minutes later, scored by England international midfielder Jermaine Jenas.

Berbatov, signed for 10.9 million pounds (20.6 million dollars) in the pre-season from German side Bayer Leverkusen, got his first goal in a Spurs shirt thanks to some

impressive work from England winger Aaron Lennon.

He turned Blades defender Chris Armstrong time and again before firing in a low cross for Berbatov to score from close range.

For the second, he headed down a pass from Republic of Ireland striker Robbie Keane into the path of Jenas who clipped the ball over goalkeeper Paddy Kenny.

Tottenham boss Martin Jol said expectations would not be a worry at White Hart Lane this season and praised the way Keane and Berbatov played together in attack.

"They played with five at the back and Robbie's so clever, he dropped off at the right moments and Berbatov played well as well so I think we caused them a lot of prob-

lems," said the Dutchman.

Blades boss Neil Warnock admitted Spurs deserved the victory but said he was proud of his side's effort.

"I thought they were a super side," he said.

"For the first 25 minutes we couldn't get near them. It was a disappointment because we were a little bit sluggish in certain departments."

"Overall we were beaten by a good side. I thought Keane was fantastic; what can you say about players like that?"

Spurs played stylish football with South Korea full-back Lee Young-Pyo and Lennon combining well down the left flank.

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Tottenham striker Robbie Keane (R) tries to shrug off the attention of Sheffield United captain Chris Morgan during the Premiership match at White Hart Lane on Tuesday.

Italy succumb to FIFA

AFP, Rome

The Italian football federation on Wednesday bowed to pressure from football's world ruling body FIFA over its role in the aftermath of the Juventus match-fixing scandal.

Juventus were demoted to Serie B by Italian sports authorities but since then the Turin giants have been appealing to the country's courts to overturn the ruling.

FIFA was up in arms at what it sees as a lax attitude by the FIGC, and what it regarded as moves on the part of Juventus which are contrary to FIFA regulations.

"We have given the FIGC until midday today (Wednesday, 1000 GMT) to tell us how they are going to convince, or prevent Juventus from appealing their case in the Italian courts," FIFA spokesman Andreas Herren told AFP.

FIFA, under their rules, have the power to hand over the whole affair to its Emergency Committee which could then decide to rule on an "eventual suspension of the Italian federation", according to Herren.

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Germany name assistant coach

AFP, Berlin

Germany manager Joachim Low has appointed former Bayern Munich player Hans-Dieter Flick as his assistant coach ahead of the Euro 2008 qualifying campaign, the German Football Federation (DFB) said Wednesday.

"It is a huge challenge for me and I am really looking forward to it," Flick said.

"I want to play my part in a successful Euro 2008 qualifying campaign and then win the title which is Joachim Low's target."

Low, who succeeded Jurgen Klinsmann after the World Cup, was keen to get an assistant in before the first Euro 2008 qualifier against the Republic of Ireland in Stuttgart on September 2 and has got his first choice in Flick.

The 41-year-old Flick played 148 Bundesliga matches for Bayern and FC Cologne before turning his hand to management with regional side TSG Hoffenheim.

Hoffenheim sacked him in November 2005 after five years in charge and since then Flick has been working with Austrian side Salzburg under the management team of Giovanni Trapattoni and Lothar Matthaus.

CL winners can net up to 100 million

REUTERS, London

The winner of this season's Champions League could earn up to 100 million euros (\$130 million) on top of UEFA prize money and tournament gate receipts, a study said on Wednesday.

Increased sponsorship, extra television revenue, higher attendances and inflated player values look set to swell the victorious club's coffers long after they lift the trophy in Athens on May 23.

Ahead of the group stage draw in Monaco on Thursday, KRC Research and Champions League sponsor MasterCard assembled 12 leading football and business experts to estimate the extended windfall for the winning team.

The 100 million euro figure does not include cash awarded to the

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Milan make the grade

AFP, Belgrade



Italian giants AC Milan may have received a huge slice of luck by being allowed to compete in this season's Champions League but they made no mistake in reaching the group stage here on Tuesday beating Red Star Belgrade 2-1 to win the tie 3-1 on aggregate.

Goals by evergreen Italian veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi and former Dutch international midfielder Clarence Seedorf were enough to see them past the former champions, whose sole reply from Dusan Djokic came 10 minutes from time of the third preliminary round second leg clash.

Milan were only playing because they earned a reduced sentence from an appeal against their original

punishment for match fixing, which included a 44-point deduction from last season that had seen them knocked out of European qualification.

However, they were eventually restored to a position sufficiently high to give them a place in the Champions League preliminary stages.

Evidently even that let-off - which did not please European football's governing body UEFA - has not assuaged coach Carlo Ancelotti's sense of injustice.

"I still think that we have been the victims of an injustice," said the former AC Milan and Italy midfielder.

"We should not have had to play this preliminary round match."

"Now having got this out of the way we will think about something else."

Inzaghi popped up in the 29th minute to nod home Gennaro Gattuso's pinpoint cross for the 37th

goal in the Champions League with the 33-year-old, who also scored in the first leg.

Inzaghi's lively display contrasted sharply to that of his younger strike partner Antonio Gilardino, who was continually caught offside or whose first touch let him down making it all the more likely that Milan will pursue their interest in Real Madrid's Brazilian striker Ronaldo, even if the Spanish club say they do not want to sell him.

Inzaghi, though, stuck by his misfiring partner.

"Even if he did not score, he was really good because he worked hard for me, like the rest of the team."

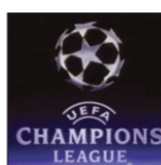
Those with a superstitious penchant may take a bet on AC Milan winning the trophy as the last time they landed the title in 2003 they again started in the third preliminary round with Inzaghi scoring twice like he did in this tie.



Liverpool midfielder Jermaine Pennant (R) and striker Peter Crouch celebrate after the latter scored a goal during their Champions League qualifying round clash in Kiev on Tuesday.

Draw sees Liverpool through

AFP, Kiev



Liverpool scraped through to the Champions League group stages after a less than convincing 3-2 aggregate victory following a 1-1 draw against Maccabi Haifa here on Tuesday.

The 2005 champions were much the better side, particularly in a largely one-sided first half, but still suffered several late scares as Maccabi came close to snatching a shock result.

Beantpole striker Peter Crouch opened the scoring on 54 minutes with a near post header from Jermaine Pennant's cross after the former Arsenal and Birmingham winger had beaten defender Haim Magralishvili.

But nine minutes later Roberto Colautti tapped home the equaliser after Xavier Anderson made a storming run from midfield right at the heart of the Liverpool defence.

Pepe Reina kept out his shot at full stretch but was powerless to prevent Colautti mopping up the rebound.

Crouch admitted it had not been a pretty game to watch but paid credit to stubborn opponents.

"That was a difficult game. They proved over the two legs that they

were a difficult side to play against," he told ITV. "It wasn't pretty but at least we got through."

Crouch is at least thriving on the service of wingers like Pennant and Chilean Mark Gonzalez as coach Rafael Benitez has switched to a classic British style of play this season.

"It's good for someone like me to have two wingers like Pennant and Gonzalez. Pennant did great going down the wing and for me it was just a case of getting in the box."

Crouch is also far from overawed by the challenge of keeping his place in the side following the arrival of Dutch forward Dirk Kuyt from Feyenoord.

"Of course it's good to have competition. You're always going to have competition at a big club and I hope I can thrive on that and get a couple of goals."

The English Premiership team dominated the ball in the first half but it was Maccabi who came the closest to scoring on 21 minutes when Alain Masudi's strike was ruled out for a marginal offside against former West Ham forward Yaniv Katon.

Luis Garcia was at the helm of most of Liverpool's attacking probes in the first period and three times he was denied by Maccabi goalkeeper Nir Davitovitch.

Xabi Alonso also pulled the trigger on one occasion but his

delightful, disguised curling effort sailed just inches wide of Davitovitch's post.

Six minutes after the break, Alonso again went close with a free-kick this time, but he just could not find the inside of the far post.

Just three minutes later, though, Crouch managed his first ever European goal.

After Collautti's equaliser, though, Maccabi went close to snatching a victory and taking the tie, which had been switched to Kiev over security fears in Israel, into extra time.

Eight minutes from the end, Collautti hit a stunning long-range curling strike that Reina tipped away with his fingertips.

That came just four minutes after young Danish centre-back Daniel Agger had to hack the ball away after substitute Eyal Meshumar had carved through the Reds' rearguard.

Benitez will have been a relieved man to hear the final whistle as his no-frills outfit made the money-spinning progress to the group stages of Europe's premier club competition.

The draw for the group stages takes place on Thursday where champions Barcelona and big guns Real Madrid, Chelsea, Manchester United and Inter Milan enter the fray.

Quaresma returns

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari on Tuesday recalled FC Porto striker Ricardo Quaresma, who he controversially overlooked for the 2006 World Cup, for a Euro 2008 qualifier against Finland next month.

Quaresma, 22, was one of four players who will return to the national team for the Group A match in Helsinki on September 6 as well as a friendly against Denmark at Brondby five days earlier.

The player, who helped FC Porto to a league-Cup double in Portugal last season, last played for the national team during a 3-0 friendly

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SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Quim (Benfica), Ricardo (Sporting Lisbon)
Defenders: Fernando Meira (Stuttgart/GER), Marco Caneira (Sporting Lisbon), Nuno Valente (Everton/ENG), Paulo Ferreira (Chelsea/ENG), Ricardo Carvalho (Chelsea/GER), Ricardo Costa (FC Porto), Ricardo Rocha (Benfica)
Midfielders: Deco (FC Barcelona/ESP), Petit (Benfica), Carlos Martins (Sporting Lisbon), Joao Moutinho (Sporting Lisbon), Costinha (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Tiago (Lyon/FRA)
Strikers: Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United/ENG), Ricardo Quaresma (FC Porto), Helder Postiga (FC Porto), Hugo Almeida (Werder Bremen/GER), Luis Boa Morte (Fulham/ENG), Simao Sabrosa (Benfica), Nuno Gomes (Benfica).



AC Milan midfield duo Kaka (L) and Clarence Seedorf celebrate the Dutchman's winning goal against Crvena Zvezda in their Champions League qualifying round clash in Belgrade on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP