



A supporter (L) runs towards Brazilian player Robinho as he breached security to enter the stadium during Brazil's friendly against Ecuador at the Rasunda Stadium in Solna on Tuesday.

Spain ponder Lippi option

Marcello Lippi is being linked with the Spanish national job should Luis Aragones be shown the door. The latter is under increasing pressure in the role after last month's embarrassing defeat to Northern Ireland was followed up by another Euro 2008 qualifying loss to Sweden on Saturday. And now reports in Spain and Italy are claiming that the Spanish FA could turn to Lippi who is available for hire after he quit as Italy boss following World Cup glory. However, it is unclear at this stage whether the Spanish position would be of interest to the Viareggio. Although he recently admitted that he would be tempted by a future in La Liga, Lippi is thought to be keen on the idea of a return to the club scene. "Football will still be my job in a few months time," the former Napoli and Juventus tactician stated as recently as last night. "It won't be my immediate future, but it is only right that I keep an eye of the football world on a daily basis." Lippi was appointed as Italy Coach in 2004 after Giovanni Trapattoni's Azzurri side failed at the European Championships.

Neill leads Socceroos

A heartthrob and natural leader, the eloquent Lucas Neill is the face of the 're-invented' Socceroos in the aftermath of this year's World Cup. The Blackburn Rovers defender has taken over the captaincy armband of the Australian team and has assumed the responsibility of lifting the sport's profile. Neill led the Australian team for the first time in last Saturday's 1-1 draw with Paraguay in a friendly in Brisbane and on Wednesday captained the Socceroos in their final Asian Cup group qualifier against Bahrain in Sydney. While other players holidayed after the World Cup in Germany in June, Neill flew back to Australia to complete a series of media and corporate engagements with teammate and best mate, Everton midfielder Tim Cahill. After a long apprenticeship in the English lower leagues with Millwall, Neill is now being chased by Liverpool, monitored by Barcelona and is captain of his

country. "I am now officially at the pinnacle of all my expectations," Neill told reporters Wednesday. "The last couple of months, I keep ticking off dreams, and achieving milestones," the 28-year-old defender said. "All my boyhood dreams have now been achieved. And this is well and truly up there. It's as good, if not better, as being able to enter into the World Cup." Neill makes it clear he is willing and happy to bear the burden of leadership. A week after the player pencilled in to skipper the team in Brisbane last weekend, Craig Moore, was suspended for failing to show up for training, responsibility seems to be the new captain's new favourite word. "I think as a player we all have a responsibility to keep football where it is," Neill said. "There's still a little bit of World Cup fever at the moment. Everybody is still flavour of the month with everybody, which is great. "But, as a player, you are responsible for making sure that discipline on and off the field is

maintained, that when we come back and play in Australia we give everything we've got and try and give a little bit back to the public. "I think the mini-success we had in the World Cup, the acknowledgement we're getting now, is slightly overwhelming," he said. "It makes you feel a great sense of responsibility and achievement that you've helped raise the profile of the game in this country." Australia, under Dutch coach Guus Hiddink, reached the last 16 in their first World Cup finals for 32 years, where they were beaten by a disputed last-minute penalty by eventual champions Italy. Neill was inconsolable when he was controversially judged to have brought down Italian defender Fabio Grosso in the penalty area, setting up the winning penalty by substitute Francesco Totti in the fifth minute of stoppage time.

Del Piero to carry on

Juventus legend Alessandro Del Piero insists he has no intention of retiring from international football. "I want to play on until I'm 40," he stated. The Bianconeri symbol will turn 32 in November and although he lifted the World Cup in the summer, Del Piero says he has no thoughts of ending his Azzurri love affair. "I would play on for Italy until the end of my career," confessed the former Padova player. "There's no age limit to play for the Azzurri and I would like to do it until I am 40." The striker was warmly welcomed by hundreds of Georgian fans which was completely different than the one at the Stadio Olimpico where, during the match against Ukraine, Del Piero was largely contested by the Roman fans. "I don't care if the supporters whistle at me because this often means that they fear you or your club," continued Pinturichio. "On the other hand being cheered by the fans, like here in Georgia or like in Piacenza last week, is the best feeling for a player." Italy's No 10 shirt worn by Daniele De Rossi at the weekend is still without a suitable owner after Francesco Totti temporarily quit the Azzurri scene. Roma midfielder Simone Perrotta thinks that Del Piero should get it, but Alex does not share his view. "Five years ago I picked the No 7 jersey and I will keep it, even in the future as that was the right choice," he added. "Does Totti want me to be the No 10? Well you should ask him about that and not me..."

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Romario trains with new club

Former world footballer of the year Romario has had his first training session for his new Brazilian club Tupi though his move from American club Miami FC has not officially gone through. The 40-year-old Romario, a World Cup winner with Brazil in 1994, has according to his own calculations, scored 984 career goals and would like to break the 1000-goal barrier before possible retirement next year. The Brazilian football federation have said however that Romario, who is also due to make a four-match guest stint with Australia's Adelaide United, cannot join third division Tupi because all transfers from outside the country were only possible up to August 31.

Australia frontrunner for team of the year

Australia led the race to be named Asian Football Confederation (AFC) national team of the year as shortlists were released Wednesday. The Socceroos, who only joined the AFC in January, upstaged their Asian rivals by reaching the last 16 at the World Cup in Germany, only to be knocked out by a last-minute penalty against Italy. It was the country's best-ever achievement in two World Cup campaigns, spanning 32 years. Australia were also the first team through to the finals of the Asian Cup, to be hosted jointly by

Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam next year. Other nominees -- Japan, South Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia -- all failed to get beyond the group stages at the World Cup. In other nominations, South Korean teams Ulsan and Chonbuk will fight it out with Al Karameh of Syria and Al Qadisiya of Kuwait to be named club of the year. The player of the year shortlist has yet to be released, with some crucial games still to come before the awards ceremony in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates on November 29. The Korean trio of Park Ji-sung at Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur's Lee Young-Pyo and Reading star Seol Ki-Hyeon are all expected to be in the hunt.

Park was the logical choice to receive the award last year but it controversially went to Saudi Arabian defender Hamad Al Montashari because the United playmaker could not appear at the awards night in Kuala Lumpur. The requirement that a player must attend the ceremony to be considered for the award is retained this year, which could again impact on some of Asia's brightest stars. North Korea under-20 coach Choe Kwang-Sok, China's women's team coach Ma Liangxing, Al Qadisiya's Mohamed Ibrahim and Al Karameh's Mohamed Kwid are the candidates for coach of the year.

UEFA probe racism

Claims by two England players they were called monkeys during an under-21 match against Germany will be investigated by European football's governing body, UEFA president Lennart Johansson said. Micah Richards and Anton Ferdinand were allegedly targeted with the abuse which overshadowed England's 2-0 victory in Leverkusen on Tuesday which earned qualification for the European championships.

An English Football Association spokesman said: "We will be formally communicating with UEFA in the next couple of days." West Ham defender Ferdinand added: "It's in the hands of the FA and I am sure they'll deal with it in the appropriate manner. I don't want to say anything about it at this stage." UEFA president Lennart Johansson told BBC Radio Five Live: "This has to be investigated and it will have its consequences, that's clear. It is for the disciplinary board to decide on a punishment. I won't speculate on the outcome but racism is a very serious issue."

"I can accept that people think fines aren't enough anymore," he said. "If you try something and it has no effect then you have to look at other options." Bayern Munich's England midfielder Owen Hargreaves said: "You'd like to give the young German players the benefit of the doubt. "Things might be said in the heat of the match, but I would think it was a language barrier thing, more a case of them being limited in what they're trying to get across. "I don't think they would purposely be racist, although obviously racism is still around."

Gazprom to sponsor Schalke

Russian energy giant Gazprom has signed a sponsorship deal with German football club Schalke 04 to gain greater brand recognition in Germany, officials said here Tuesday. "We held negotiations and decided to become sponsors," said Sergei Fursenko, president of the Gazprom-owned Zenit football club in the northwestern Russian city of

Saint Petersburg. The deal is intended "to develop our brand and develop in the energy market in Germany," he added. Schalke 04, based in the industrial city of Gelsenkirchen in western Germany, won the UEFA Cup in 1997 and is in Germany's top-flight although it has not won the league title since 1958. Fursenko said the sponsorship was worth "significantly less" than the 125 million euros (156.7 million dollars) cited in German newspapers but declined to give further details.

"It's a very interesting team. It has a huge number of fans, especially in energy companies," he told reporters on the sidelines of a meeting in Dresden between Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Gazprom, the world's largest gas company, is keen to expand into the energy retail sector in Europe and signed a major deal with German chemicals and energy group BASF earlier this year.



Russian president Vladimir Putin (R) and Clemens Toennis from Schalke hold a Schalke 04 uniform bearing the logo of Russian energy giant Gazprom after signing a sponsoring contract in Dresden on Tuesday.

8x3 crossword puzzle grid.

Trio chase Di Natale

Juventus are thinking about an alternative to Alex Del Piero and could decide to offer 5-million-pound-plus Under-21 international Raffaele Palladino. Milan, who are having a striker crisis despite the arrival of Ricardo Oliveira, may look to refresh their options in the New Year. A cash plus Marco Borriello bid has been suggested. However, it is understood that Roma may in fact be in pole position to land the second striker who can also play on the flanks. Giallorossi boss Luciano Spalletti knows him well after their time together in Udine and he could play a key role in the player's future.

Court reversal stuns Halilhodzic

Former Paris Saint Germain coach Vahid Halilhodzic was left stunned on Tuesday after an appeals court overturned a decision for him to be paid 3.5 million euros by the club and instead demanded he pay them 80,000 euros in damages and interest accrued on it. The 53-year-old Bosnian firebrand will also have to pay back half of the total awarded to him last December while PSG will have to give him another 40,000 euros due to him for his salary between February 9 and 23 of 2005. Halilhodzic had sued PSG over breaking his contract which still had two-and-a-half-years to run at the time while the club appealed saying that the former Yugoslav international striker had walked out on them. "It is a terrible surprise and totally incomprehensible," said Halilhodzic, who in his first season

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at PSG had guided them to second in the championship and the French Cup, however they were near the relegation zone when he left the club. "Never in my life, did I either think or say that I was going to resign. "Francis Graille (the PSG president at the time) knows better than anyone else what he said to me on February 8 2005. "He said to me: 'Vahid come in and sit down, you will not be in charge for the rest of the season. I said 'thank you' and I left." Halilhodzic, who has since coached Turkish outfit Trabzonspor and then Saudi giants Al-Ittihad, said that the whole episode had left an indelible impression on him. "This will mark me for the rest of my life. "I really wanted to do something with the people I worked with there after such a great first year."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS 1 Vagrant 5 Ar-lee connector 8 Overly proper 12 Without practical significance 14 Relaxation 15 Dag-wood's specialty 16 Window ledge 17 Fast plane 18 Removed the lid 20 Thespian 23 See 24 Do finger-painting 25 Summer footwear 28 Sea eagle 29 Seeps slowly 30 Discoverer's cry 32 "Happy Gilmore" star 34 Gloomy 35 Commotions 36 Photo finish 37 St. Francis' home 40 Festive 41 Stringed instrument 42 Poet Carl 47 Inactive 48 Swaps for a newer model 49 Act 50 Stitch 51 Moist 52 "Never in my life, did I either think or say that I was going to resign." 53 "Francis Graille (the PSG president at the time) knows better than anyone else what he said to me on February 8 2005." 54 "He said to me: 'Vahid come in and sit down, you will not be in charge for the rest of the season. I said 'thank you' and I left.'" 55 Halilhodzic, who has since coached Turkish outfit Trabzonspor and then Saudi giants Al-Ittihad, said that the whole episode had left an indelible impression on him. 56 "This will mark me for the rest of my life." 57 "I really wanted to do something with the people I worked with there after such a great first year."

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle grid with letters F I O L H N W L N C Z M N C B Z F O L Z W T Y A L P H M W G N L D J Y L J O T Z C , N V N D A T O Z I O G J W M M O P N Z Z I O Z Y A T P O V T W L B . Saturday's Cryptoquip: WHEN JASON OF MYTH JILTED HIS FAITHFUL WIFE, I WOULD HAVE TO SAY IT WAS A MEDEA EVENT. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: F equals W

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.