

'Don't muck with the Duck'

AFP, Tokyo

South American champions Internacional on Tuesday warned the media to stay away from teen prodigy Alexandre 'The Duck' Pato at the Club World Cup.

The 17-year-old, hailed as the next big thing in Brazilian football, has been kept under tight wraps here and coach Abel Braga urged the press not to put him under pressure.

"He's got the ability and he answers in a positive way every time we ask him to do something," said Braga.

"But it's not good to put all the pressure on him. We don't want him to have all the responsibility.

"We're a team. He's very important but he's just 17 years old at the moment."

Pato earned rave reviews in his debut for Inter last month, scoring with his first touch, setting up two more goals and heading against the post in less than an hour.

Interest from foreign clubs, including Arsenal, prompted Inter to give him a new three-year contract at five times his previous wages and to insert a 20 million dollar buy-out penalty.

Inter need to beat African champions Al Ahly in their opening match on Wednesday to advance to the final, where they are likely to meet favourites Barcelona.

"Pato has got the qualities to take the pressure but he doesn't have the experience yet," said captain Fernandao.

"Everyone's looking at him like he's the player who's going to save the team. He's got the qualities to do that but it's not fair to put pressure on him."

Victory on Wednesday could bring 'The Duck' face-to-face with two-time World Player of the Year Ronaldinho, who cut his teeth with Inter's Porto Alegre rivals, Gremio.

"I've heard about him - I know all of Inter's players because they're from Brazil and I discuss them with my friends," Ronaldinho told a separate press conference.

"I hear he has a great future ahead of him but personally I've never seen him play."

Braga also announced that he had signed a year's extension to his contract with Inter.

Curbishley keen on Hammers job

AFP, London

Alan Curbishley has said he would be delighted to take over as West Ham coach following the sacking of Alan Pardew.

Curbishley, who has been bidding time since he stood down as manager of Charlton in the summer to take a break from football, is believed to be the Hammers' first-choice replacement.

He has already been installed as the bookmakers' favourite to take over at the club he previously played for and Curbishley is keen to talk to West Ham's new chairman Eggert Magnusson.

"I'd love to know what they want to say -- of course I'm interested," he told the Daily Express.

"I suspect we will get together over the next day or so when the dust has settled.

"Perhaps having the chance to manage them, five years after they were allegedly seeking me to replace Harry Redknapp, is a massive honour.

"Once you are brought up in a background like West Ham the affection you have for the club never goes away."



French legend Zinedine Zidane greets a Kabylie girl during his visit to a clinic in Ben Amran village in his parents' homeland Algeria on Monday. Zidane is on a week-long visit to the country at the invitation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Blackburn look for Euro solace

AFP, Paris



Blackburn take on French side Nancy in the UEFA Cup on Wednesday in a battle for the coveted top spot in their group.

Both sides have already secured their passage to the next round but there's still plenty at stake with the group leaders guaranteed a tie against a third-placed finisher in the next round.

Blackburn have sailed through this stage with wins over Wisla Krakow and FC Basel and a goalless draw against 2002 winners Feyenoord.

And they will be aiming to bounce back after Saturday's 3-1 defeat to Newcastle in the Premiership in which Swiss defender Stephane Henchoz was sent off.

Nancy drew 0-0 with Nice at the weekend to leave them seventh in the French first division.

This is the first time the two teams have met.

In Group E's other game Wisla Krakow and Feyenoord are fighting it out for the right to third spot.

Over in France Paris Saint Germain stage their first home game at the Parc des Princes since the death of a fan after last month's 4-2 defeat to Israeli side Hapoel Tel Aviv.

UEFA, European football's governing body, have classified the match as "high risk".

And the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, has called for hundreds of troublemakers to be banned from the game against Greece's Panathinaikos in a bid to prevent a repeat of the ugly scenes that followed the November 23 tie.

The night ended in tragedy when a black off-duty police officer shot dead a PSG supporter and seriously injured another as he tried to shield a Hapoel Tel Aviv fan from a mob of around 150 PSG supporters.

Panathinaikos have also had their problems on and off the pitch with Greek police detaining 62 of their fans, some of whom were found in possession of weapons

and cannabis, after clashing with rivals Olympiakos last month.

PSG must win this game to stand any chance of scraping through as Group G's third side while Panathinaikos have already guaranteed their place.

PSG go into this make-or-break tie on the back of a 3-1 loss to French league leaders Lyon at the Stade Gerland on Sunday.

Skipper Pauleta, who scored in that loss, said: "Every match for us from now on is like a last chance. If we don't beat Panathinaikos we'll be out. We're going through difficult times, we're doing our best to pull ourselves through."

In Italy Palermo, flying high in third in the Italian first division, have their backs to the wall in Europe's second club competition, and require a win against Celta Vigo in their last Group H to avoid an early exit.

Elsewhere Former Champions League winners Ajax are sitting pretty and only a 5-0 loss to SV Zulte Waregem will end their UEFA Cup campaign in Group F.

Reggina penalty reduced

INTERNET, undated

Reggina have had their points deduction for match-fixing reduced from 15 to 11 points by the Italian Olympic Committee. The Southern outfit appealed against the sentence following their involvement in the Calciopoli scandal that saw Juventus relegated to Serie B.

Serie B side Arezzo's appeal to have their six-point deduction reduced was rejected.

Reggina are one of five top-flight sides who started the season in negative figures, with Siena (one), Lazio (three), Milan (eight) and Fiorentina (15) all picking up points penalties.

The club remain bottom of the Serie A table on six points, although they have a better match record than six other sides in the division.

Everton planning move out of Liverpool

AFP, London

Everton are considering a move away from Goodison Park, their home for the last 114 years, to a new stadium outside the city of Liverpool, the Premiership club confirmed on Tuesday.

Under the plans, which have provoked angry opposition from many supporters, the new stadium would be built in the nearby town of Kirkby as part of a development in partnership with Britain's biggest supermarket chain Tesco and Knowsley Borough Council.

Goodison has been Everton's home since 1892, when the club moved from its former base at Anfield, which was taken over by local rivals Liverpool.

The ground has a capacity of just over 40,000 and local planning constraints mean Everton cannot expand on the site to capitalise on their potential to draw bigger crowds.

Club chairman Bill Kenwright told the annual general meeting of shareholders on Monday evening that a move was vital for Everton's future.

"I would love to say here forever," he said. "But it is not an financial option for Everton to remain at Goodison Park."

Although club executives stressed that no decision had been made on the proposed move to Kirkby, Everton will not look at alternative sites.

Liverpool are close to finalising plans to leave Anfield for a new 60,000-seat stadium at nearby Stanley Park in time for the start of the 2009-10 season.

Angel evades sanction

AFP, London

Aston Villa striker Juan Pablo Angel will not face any disciplinary action over an incident in which he appeared to elbow Sheffield United's Chris Morgan during Monday night's 2-2 draw between the two clubs.

Television pictures indicated that Angel's elbow had clearly made contact with the Blades captain's face in the closing minutes of the match.

Referee Mark Halsey took no action at the time but confirmed to the Football Association on Tuesday that he had seen the incident, which prevents the governing body from taking any further action.

Had the official missed the incident, the FA could have used video evidence as the basis for a possible violent conduct charge.

Sania storms into final

AFP, Doha

Indian favourite Sania Mirza stunned Chinese top seed Li Na with a 6-2, 6-2 victory on Tuesday to secure her place in the Asian Games women's singles tennis final.

Top seed Lee Hyung Taik brushed aside Cecil Mamiit from the Philippines 7-5, 6-0 to move into the final of the men's singles and set up a chance of his second gold medal at these Games.

The day, however, belonged to Mirza who plays Zheng Jie from China in Wednesday's final after the second seed downed Japan's Aiko Nakamura 6-3, 6-2.

World number 66 Mirza said she kept expecting Li to come charging back.

"I kept thinking she is 21 in the world so she can definitely come back here at any second. But I just tried to do what I knew I had to do," she said.

Li said that she was underprepared for the match and surprised by Mirza's powerful ground strokes.

"I felt as though the ball was coming off my racket really well. She just played well. She deserved to win," the top seed said.

Li, 24, had been hot favourite to win this tournament after she made

Ferguson wants treble



AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson ordered his Manchester United players Monday to win the Champions League, the English Premiership and the FA Cup if they want to be considered as a great side.

He told his charges it was time to prove how good they are by turning their promising start to the season into silverware.

Ferguson said it was no good just showing signs of being a peerless team -- top players back up the swagger with medals round their necks.

"I'll put it this way: I feel far better today waking up and looking at my team than I did two or three years ago when we weren't winning anything," the Scot said.

"Because at the end of the day, you have to win at our club. That's the nuts and bolts of it all."

"The present day team are showing signs of being a really good team. But they've got to win the league, they've got to win the European Cup, they've got to win an FA Cup. They've got to win these things."

"That's the only way you'll be judged as a good team. Coming a good second, that doesn't come into it."

United are eight points clear of champions Chelsea at the top of the Premiership and are in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho has had the last laugh on Ferguson in his first two years in English football, winning the championship both times.

The former Porto coach said United would be "in trouble" if they thought this season's title was in the bag.

But Ferguson has had enough of his taunts and "Special One" swagger, and, being no stranger to mind games himself, the Scot was adamant that the Portuguese manager's digs would not be allowed to derail his title charge.

"We'll all be in trouble if we listen to Jose enough," he said.

"The important thing is to keep our heads and not get carried away, don't make any predictions. I won't be letting my players or myself fall into that trap of thinking we've won the league."

"It's not easily won and Chelsea know that better than anyone," said Ferguson, who has guided United to the Premiership title eight times.

"All we've done is given ourselves a foundation. It's the first time we've ever been in this position at the beginning of December. Usually we're lagging behind a little. I think we've given ourselves a good chance."

Ferguson said he was confident that his side would last the distance with Chelsea thanks to a combination of livewire youngsters and battle-hardened veterans.

"All the championship races are tough because you know you can't make mistakes," said the 64-year-

old.

"The real test comes in the run-in when you know that mistakes can cost you everything.

"I'm sure it'll be ourselves and Chelsea. I'm sure we'll last the distance. I'm confident of that because we've got a lot of energy in the team, we've youth in the side. We have got a couple of old codgers like Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs but we can rest them at the right time."

"When the run-in comes in, experience teaches you that we've been there before."

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon, a defector from United, recently claimed that the Blues have the potential to be the world's most powerful club by 2014.

But Ferguson snorted at any notions of Chelsea being an elite name in world football, saying there were European teams with a far more illustrious past.

"There's nothing wrong with people having ambition, I've no problem with that," Ferguson scoffed.

"But there's other great clubs in the world: there's ourselves, Arsenal and Liverpool with history, there's Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich and the Italian giants, and all these clubs have got a fantastic history."

"So they've got a big mountain to climb to get over that lot. We'll continue doing our talking on the pitch."



Portugal and Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) looks at a boy shooting a ball at Obidos, near Lisbon on Monday. Ronaldo distributed Christmas gifts to children living in the area of Obidos.

CLUB WORLD CUP

Barca play down title credentials



AFP, Tokyo

Barcelona on Tuesday warned they faced a tough assignment to claim their first Club World Cup after arriving at the tournament late and jet-lagged.

The favourites flew in on Monday, three days before their semifinal with Club America and in the middle of a demanding domestic and European season.

"We've played a lot of matches recently and now we've come to Japan, so we haven't had much time to prepare and we're affected by jet-lag," said two-time World Player of the Year Ronaldinho.

"We need to be in our best condition to play our best. I know it's going to be a tough series of matches."

Barcelona are bidding to win the first world trophy in their history, outstripping Johan Cruyff's dream team who were beaten by Sao Paulo in the equivalent competition in 1992.

The European champions were the last team here and were mobbed at the airport by a crowd of screaming fans on Monday. They will play America at Yokohama on Thursday.

"We're committed to win but both myself and my teammates realise this is not an easy championship to win," Ronaldinho said.

"Of course winning is our goal but it's not going to be easy."

Midfielder Xavi said CONCACAF title-holders America were in a better position after already playing one match, a 1-0 win over Jeonbuk Motors.

"Club America are very well prepared because they arrived quite a while ago so I'm sure they don't have any jet-lag," Xavi said.

"Maybe we're at a bit of a disadvantage because we just arrived. I think my legs aren't in perfect condition and my muscles are weak."

Ronaldinho said it was hard to separate the teams, who are both champions of their respective federations and drew in a friendly in August.

"Both of us are good teams, both have big players and we're champions of our Champions Leagues so I don't think you can say who's best," he said.

"All we can say is it's going to be a very exciting and entertaining match."

The Brazilian also dodged a question on Alexandre 'The Duck' Pato, the 17-year-old phenomenon unearthed by South American champions Internacional.

Pato is a product of Porto Alegre where Ronaldinho once played for Inter's rivals Gremio. Inter are strongly tipped to meet Barcelona in Sunday's final.

"I've heard about him - I know all of Inter's players because they're from Brazil and I discuss them with my friends," Ronaldinho said.

"I hear he has a great future ahead of him but personally I've never seen him play."

Six continental champions contest the Club World Cup, which has replaced the annual Europe-South America face-off played since 1960.



India's sensation Sania Mirza clenches her fist after winning a point against China's Li Na during ladies singles semifinal at the Asiad in Doha on Tuesday.