

Internacional reach final

AFP, Tokyo



Brazilian wonderkid Alexandre Pato produced a dazzling display as Internacional beat Egypt's Al Ahly 2-1 to reach the Club World Cup final on Wednesday.

The yellow-booted Pato, 17, scored once and had a goal disallowed before being taken off injured in the second half.

Angolan striker Flavio headed an equaliser after half-time only for Pato's 19-year-old replacement, Luiz Adriano, to find the winner on 72 minutes.

Tournament favourites Barcelona play Mexico's Club America on Thursday for the chance to meet the South American champions in the final.

"Ahly hit the post and their goal came from nowhere, so it was equal and maybe we were a bit lucky," said Inter coach Abel Braga.

"The two young players have the same responsibility as the other players and I'm happy with them -- they were relaxed, they scored and decided the match."

Al Ahly coach Manuel Jose said Inter were a different proposition

from Auckland City, the mainly amateur team they beat in the quarterfinals.

"We gave them too much space, that was not in the plan," he said.

"But that's the difference between playing against a professional team and an amateur team. We don't think we were in any way inferior to them."

Pato, nicknamed 'The Duck', was straight into the action and found the net after nine minutes only for his header to be disallowed for offside.

He then directed a firm header over the bar before opening the scoring in the 23rd minute courtesy of a defensive bungle.

The youngster couldn't control a through pass but when the ball came back off an Ahly defender, he turned unmarked and swept it into the bottom right-hand corner.

The African champions came back strongly with playmaker Mohamed Aboutrika slamming a swivel-and-shot against the post and Emad El Nahas forcing a spectacular save from Inter keeper Clemer with a driving free-kick.

On half-time Pato was picked out by a long pass but shot weakly, while Mohamed Shawky missed with an acrobatic bicycle-kick at the other end.

After the break Pato turned on the style, juggling the ball on his

shoulder and heel as he charged down the wing.

But Inter switched off at the back and found their lead erased when they gave away the ball from a defensive throw.

Tarek Said crossed to the unmarked Flavio whose diagonal header looped past Clemer in the Inter goal on 54 minutes.

Inter's woes appeared to increase when Pato was carried off clutching his right ankle on 63 minutes. Braga later said the injury was only minor.

But his replacement Luiz Adriano soon restored Inter's advantage with a glancing near-post header from Ceara's corner just eight minutes after he took the field.

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 with a 20 million dollar buy-out clause.

Inter qualified for the tournament when they won their first South American title in August, beating Sao Paulo 4-3 in the two-legged final.

Sao Paulo won last year's Club World Cup with a 1-0 win over Liverpool in the final.

Yokohama inspiring Ronaldinho

AFP, Yokohama



Barcelona's Ronaldinho returns to the scene of his greatest triumph on Thursday hoping to duplicate that success in the Club World Cup.

On June 30, 2002, Brazil lifted their fifth World Cup at Yokohama after a tournament marked by the emergence of a bright new star.

Then a precociously talented 22-year-old, Ronaldinho set tongues wagging with an outrageous floating free-kick which knocked England out in the quarter-finals.

One move to Barcelona and two World Player of the Year awards later, the Ronaldinho legend is set.

But the black-braided maestro failed to live up to his billing at this year's World Cup and is desperate to lift Barcelona's first intercontinental trophy.

The European champions kick

off their campaign against Mexico's Club America here on Thursday with a place in the final at stake.

"I will give it all I have," Ronaldinho told reporters. "I think this is a very important match for our club and I will make sure that we take the cup home."

Barcelona are hot favourites for a win here which would outdo the exploits of Johan Cruyff's dream team after their 2-1 loss to Sao Paulo in 1992.

"I want to make history for Barcelona," said midfielder Xavi.

"The club hasn't had this title so we want to become number one in the world."

"We've practised very well, we are very well trained. We are prepared and ready to play."

Barca were the last team to arrive here, prompting concerns about jet-lag and fatigue after a tough domestic and European schedule.

But they should have few worries about facing Club America, who needed a scrambled late winner against South Korea's Jeonbuk Motors to progress.

"I don't know if Club America have any weaknesses, but I think ball possession will be key," Xavi said.

Barca are without injured forwards Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi, but Chelsea import Eidur Gudjohnsen has settled in quickly and Ronaldinho is again lighting up La Liga as the joint top-scorer with 11 goals.

Frank Rijkaard has also brought Argentine forward Javier Saviola after his recovery from injury and may choose to blood exciting Mexican prospect Giovanni Dos Santos, 17.

"He's has a lot of energy and good technique. I'm looking forward to playing with him," said Ronaldinho.

America will look to the experience of captain Cuauhtemoc Blanco and former Valencia and Lazio striker Claudio Lopez, together with the youthful talents of Juan Mosquera who turned the match against Jeonbuk.

Brazil's Internacional are playing the other semi-final against African champions Al Ahly late on Wednesday.



YELLOW BOOTS CAN SCORE: Brazilian club Internacional's wonderkid Alexandre Pato is about to shoot to score during their FIFA World Club Cup semifinal encounter against Egyptian club Al Ahly in Tokyo on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP



BACK FOR 4 YEARS: Barcelona forward Ronaldinho takes part in a training session for the club in Yokohama on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Henry out for the year

AFP, London

Thierry Henry will miss all of Arsenal's Christmas programme and is unlikely to be available until after the New Year because of a hamstring injury, Gunners boss Arsene Wenger revealed on Tuesday.

Henry has been sidelined recently with a neck problem but Wenger is more worried by the new setback.

"Thierry Henry has started his rehabilitation," Wenger said. "He's still not completely free with his hamstring but he starts to work again."

"We hope we can build him up and make him competitive again. The neck problem is sorted out. It was sciatic nerve problem but the hamstring is the most troubling at the moment."

Asked if Henry would be out until the New Year, Wenger said: "Realistically, certainly yes. I wouldn't set a precise timescale as it's difficult to predict but Christmas certainly we will miss him."

Brazil bids for 2014 World Cup

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Five-times world champion Brazil formally declared on Wednesday its bid to host the 2014 World Cup, FIFA said.

Brazilian football chief Ricardo Teixeira signed a letter of intent and handed it to FIFA bosses during the ongoing Club World Cup in Japan.

"We have formally expressed our desire to organise the 2014 World Cup, a unique opportunity for the Brazilian people who really deserve to be the eventual hosts," Teixeira said, according to FIFA's website.

Brazil is the only country to declare its intentions and will be the strong favourite. FIFA has already said it will hold the competition in South America under its rotational

policy. "Despite having so many titles in the region, the last World Cup was 28 years ago," Teixeira said, referring to Argentina 1978.

"That means that in 2014 it will be 36 years since the World Cup was last held in our continent."

"This is very important not only for Brazilian football and our people but also for South America."

Brazil hosted the World Cup once before in 1950, when its team lost 2-1 to Uruguay in the final.

Four previous World Cups have been held in South America: Uruguay 1930, Brazil 1950, Chile 1962 and Argentina 1978. Brazil is the only country to have won football's biggest prize five times. The 2010 tournament will be held in South Africa. World governing body FIFA opened the 2014 bidding last week

and said it would make a decision by next November at the latest.

However, FIFA president Sepp Blatter has said high standards had been set in recent World Cups and warned the governing body would be ready to look "further north" if there were no suitable South American candidates.

Blatter has also ruled out a potential bid by China, which is organising the next Olympics and expressed an interest in hosting the 2014 World Cup.

FIFA director of communications Jim Brown said bidders would be informed of their stadium, hotel and transport requirements within the next six or seven weeks.

Potential hosts will have to confirm their bid a month later and would then be given a deadline to submit the completed documents.

Lamps accuses Jens

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard has hit back at Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann, saying the goalkeeper "shows no respect" to anyone on the pitch.

The German accused Lampard of being "a specialist in insulting people" after Sunday's 1-1 draw between the two sides at Stamford Bridge.

But Lampard has been quick to hit back, telling The Sun: "We had words but Lehmann shows no respect to anyone on the pitch - and I don't mean that just from my own perspective."

"He has a way of looking down his nose at people. I certainly didn't say anything that I feel warrants an explanation."

"For me, it's all in the heat of battle and nonsense to start talking to the media about it afterwards."

"But the other week myself and my cousin Jamie Redknapp were out to dinner in a London restaurant and Lehmann was sitting just

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Brits fight for top spot

AFP, Paris



British clubs Tottenham and Rangers will be fighting to top their UEFA Cup groups after Thursday's matches to avoid the likes of Champions League rejects Benfica and Werder Bremen in the next round.

Tottenham host Dynamo Bucharest in Group B and Rangers entertain Serbian side Partizan Belgrade and both teams need a point to ensure top spot in Groups B and A respectively.

Spurs however must do without injured players Robbie Keane and Jermaine Jenas.

The 26-year-old Republic of Ireland skipper Keane will be out till the end of January with knee ligament damage following their 2-1 victory against Middlesbrough on December 5 and Jenas will also be out till the New Year with ankle damage from the defeat at Arsenal two days earlier.

Tottenham however can relax a little having already qualified for the last 32 knockout stage following victories against Besiktas, FC

Bruges and Bayer Leverkusen. Dynamo Bucharest have boosted their chances of advancing in the competition which starts again in February by signing Latvian international Maris Smirnovs and Deniss Romanovs on two-and-a-half-year contracts.

The pair, who were free agents, will join the Romanian club in January having left Virsliga side SK Ditton.

Smirnovs, a 30-year-old centre-back, has won 22 caps for Latvia, while 28-year-old goalkeeper Romanovs has represented his country on three occasions.

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THURSDAY'S FIXTURES

GROUP A	Auxerre (FRA) v Livorno (ITA)
	Rangers (SCO) v Partizan Belgrade (SCG)
GROUP B	Bayer Leverkusen (GER) v Besiktas (TUR)
	Tottenham (ENG) v Dynamo Bucharest (ROM)
GROUP C	Sevilla (ESP) v Alkmaar (NED)
	Braga (POR) v Grasshopper (SUI)
GROUP D	Parma (ITA) v Osasuna (ESP)
	Heerenveen (NED) v Lens (FRA)

Sir Bobby urges on Giggs

AFP, London

Sir Bobby Charlton has insisted he will be delighted if Ryan Giggs beats his record of 759 appearances for Manchester United.

Giggs currently stands on 688, joint second in the list with Munich survivor Bill Foulkes, and Charlton shares Sir Alex Ferguson's view that the 33-year-old will go on to pass his mark.

"I do not feel threatened by Ryan. I would be pleased if he did it and I am sure he will," Charlton said. "We are only talking about two seasons, so he should do it. The better the team plays, the more chances he will have and, when he does, I will be the first person to give him a hug."

Giggs might have already broken the record had it not been for recurring hamstring problems.

"He seems to have conquered those injury problems," added Charlton, now a United director.

"He used to get a lot of hamstrings but we seem to have found a way of treating him and I am very pleased about that."

"Ryan is a great lesson to any young player. Obviously we played in different eras and we didn't have any substitutes back then, so we didn't get any rest."

"But nevertheless, you cannot say Ryan is anything other than a marvellous footballer and I am proud he has been associated with Manchester United for so long."

Hammers appoint Curbishley

AFP, London



West Ham were Wednesday set to hand Alan Curbishley the task of saving the east London club from relegation, starting with Sunday's showdown with Premiership leaders Manchester United.

The former Charlton boss was understood to have verbally agreed a three-year contract as the successor to Alan Pardew, who was sacked on Monday after presiding over a run of five defeats in six matches which had left the club languishing in the relegation zone.

Reports suggested Curbishley would be joined at Upton Park by his former Charlton assistant Mervyn Day -- a former West Ham goalkeeper -- as well as hooking up again with Keith Peacock, who is already part of the backroom staff at Upton Park.

Curbishley, who began his journeyman playing career at West Ham and was brought up close to the ground, held talks with club chairman Eggert Magnusson on Tuesday.

Magnusson is the public face of the Icelandic consortium which took control of West Ham earlier this month at a cost of 85 million pounds.

Having invested so heavily, the

new owners were alarmed at the spectre of relegation, which would mean West Ham missing out on the significant increase in television revenues which is due to kick in for Premiership clubs next season.

Curbishley was quickly identified as the best available candidate to ensure survival on the strength of his record at Charlton, where he spent 15 years transforming one of London's smaller clubs into an established Premiership force.

The 49-year-old quit the Valley at the end of last season, a decision that was widely interpreted as being linked to his frustration at not having been seriously considered for the vacancy as England manager.

Charlton's subsequent slump in form has served to enhance Curbishley's reputation while he has been out of the game and he is relishing the prospect of taking on a job he turned down in 2001.

"Once you are brought up in a background like West Ham, the affection you have for the club never goes away," Curbishley said earlier this week.

One of Curbishley's first tasks will be to take a decision on the future of Argentinian pair duo Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano, whose arrival is widely credited with having undermined Pardew's authority at West

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