



Argentinian prodigy Gonzalo Higuain (C) poses with his new jersey next to Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon (L) and Honorary President Alfredo Di Stefano during his presentation at Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Thursday.

FIFA concerned about India

AFP, Geneva

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said Friday that world football's governing body will launch a campaign next year to encourage the growth of the sport in India.

"All I can say now is 'stay tuned' -- years from now, people will look back and see 2007 as the start of something remarkable for our sport in India," Blatter said in a statement.

The world's second most populous nation with some 1.08 billion inhabitants, India is historically more inclined to cricket, and the ten team national league struggles to attract funding and interest.

Blatter met an Indian delegation in Zurich on Thursday led by All India Football Federation chiefs and Minister of Information Priya Ranjan Das Muni to draw up the plan to develop football infrastructure, competitions and related business.

"India is a country with an amazing potential for growth of the beautiful game," said Blatter.

"It is home to 20 per cent of the world's population and deserves particular attention from world football's governing body."

India failed to qualify for the 2007 Asian Cup, ending bottom of their group with no points in six matches, and 24 goals against with just two scored.

FIFA currently ranks India's national side as 157th in the world.

Yet, India was rated as a powerful force in the early years of the Asian Confederation, ending runners-up to Israel in the 1964 Asian Cup, and twice winning medals in the Asian Games in the 1950s.

Juve lose Tamoi

INTERNET, undated

Juventus have lost out on a massive 160 million pounds after oil giants Tamoi rescinded their shirt sponsorship contract with the club.

The Bianconeri did have a deal in place with the company until 2010, but their relationship will now terminate at the end of the present campaign.

Juventus had been in talks with Oilinvest Bv, who control Tamoi, to renegotiate terms following the club's demotion to Serie B.

However, after months of negotiations, no compromise could be reached as the club failed to convince Tamoi to stay on board.

It's being reported in Italy on Friday that their decision to leave the Old Lady will cost the outfit an incredible 160 million pounds.

The Bianconeri were set to net 70 million pounds between 2005 and 2010, with the rest of the funds promised between July 2010 and June 2015 should they have taken up on their option to extend.

Instead, Juve have collected just 24 million pounds from the contract that had to be reassessed given that the club were no longer in Serie A and out of the Champions League.

The loss of funds may have a deep impact on the side's future seeing as they were looking to buy big in the summer.

Numerous star players have already warned officials that they will only stay in Turin if the squad is competitive at the highest levels once they complete their expected return to Serie A.

Juventus had already seen their Sky Italia TV and Nike contracts reduced by 30 per cent following their Calciopoli enforced demotion.

No regrets, says Higuain

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's latest recruit Gonzalo Higuain said he had no second thoughts about joining the club after witnessing their humiliating 3-0 defeat at home to Recreativo Huelva on Wednesday.

"These things can happen and it doesn't change the way I think about coming here," the 19-year-old former River Plate striker told a news conference on Thursday.

"I don't want to say anything negative about the game. Real Madrid have a great squad full of great players and I've come here to win lots of league titles."

The teenager, who joined Real for an estimated fee of 13 million euros (17 million dollars), said he was not intimidated by the competition he would face at his new club where he will be battling it out with Ronaldo, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Robinho and Raul for a place in the

starting lineup.

"I'm not scared at all. All I want to do is to convince the coach and my teammates through my hard work that I'm worth a place in the squad. I will be doing all I can to learn from the great players around me," he said.

Higuain shot to prominence last May when he scored twice as River Plate beat Corinthians 3-1 to knock the Brazilian champions out of the Libertadores Cup.

He struck twice more in a 3-1 win over arch-rivals Boca Juniors in October and notched a spectacular goal in a 1-1 draw at Velez Sarsfield earlier this month to end the Argentine championship as his club's top scorer with nine goals.

Higuain's father Jorge played professional football in France for Brest where Gonzalo was born in 1987.

Higuain was 10 months old when he moved to Argentina with his family and has lived there ever since.

Last month he was called up by France coach Raymond Domenech for a friendly against Greece but his father sent the French Federation a fax saying he did not want to play for the country for the time being.

The player would not make any commitments about whether his future loyalties lay with France or Argentina.

"I don't know at the moment," he said when asked which country he would prefer to play for. "I'm just trying to take things one day at a time and concentrate on playing football and leave the rest up to my representative."

Higuain's recruitment forms part of Real's policy to rejuvenate a squad that contains a host of players over 30.

They have signed Brazil's teenage left back Marcelo and Boca Juniors have agreed to sell their 20-year-old Argentine midfielder Fernando Gago to them for 27 million dollars.

Glazers earmark 'Galactico'

INTERNET, undated

The Glazer family have set aside an additional transfer budget of 25 million pounds for Manchester United to buy a brand-boosting superstar. The extra kitty was revealed in their 60-page business plan outlining how they will move the club forwards.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson also has an annual coffer of 25 million pounds for standard player purchases but -- if such a player becomes available and he would be beneficial to the team -- the Glazers will not get in the way of the United boss.

While accepting they cannot

compete with the likes of Chelsea in terms of spending power, United are keen to emulate Real Madrid's model of maximising commercial revenue even if the team are not performing on the pitch.

The Red Devils already have young household names such as Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo tied down to long-term deals at Old Trafford, so would not need to break the bank on a regular basis to bring extra big names to the club.

As expected, ticket prices are to be hiked up over the next six years, with an almost 50 per cent rise predicted by 2012. The Glazers believe seats which range from 23 to 39 pounds per match to be "undervalued" which, when compared to London clubs weighing in

at almost double that, appears a fair assessment.

There is no mention of the rumours that Old Trafford will be sold and leased-back or that separate TV deals will be pursued. Instead the Glazers outline the importance of centrally distributed TV contracts and brand-related growth through pre-season tours and benefit matches.

The report could not resist one dig at Premiership title rivals Chelsea, saying their "lack of brand appeal and limited fanbase beyond the UK make it a less compelling commercial partner" than the likes of main economic rivals Real Madrid or even Arsenal and Liverpool.

Mbeki defends WC preparations

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa is further down the road in its preparations for the 2010 football World Cup than any other previous host nation, President Thabo Mbeki said on Friday.

In his weekly newsletter to the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Mbeki knocked back any suggestion the tournament would be held elsewhere and rejected fears that Stadia would not be completed on time.

"The truth is that with regard to 2010, we have beaten all previous records with regard to the preparations for the successful hosting of the FIFA Soccer World Cup, including the benchmarks set by the highly successful 2006 German FIFA World Cup," said Mbeki.

"I am happy to report that the joint efforts of FIFA, the Local Organising Committee and the South African government, have established solid foundations for what will be an exceptional event."

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has previously expressed misgivings about the lack of construction

and renovation work on the 10 venues for the tournament.

But Mbeki said building work at the stadium in Johannesburg, which will host the final, would start early next year, and earth-moving and piling operations were already underway in Durban, Port Elizabeth and Nelspruit.

Mbeki also rubbished the notion "that some countries were already standing by to take over this responsibility from us, since it was certain that we would definitely fail to do the things FIFA required of us".

Football Federation Australia issued a statement earlier this month to dampen down speculation that it would offer itself as an alternative venue after its chief executive John O'Neill had said there were "all sorts of question marks" about South Africa's ability to stage the tournament.

"Most fortunately, consistently, Sepp Blatter, insisted correctly that our country was perfectly capable of hosting the World Cup, and would indeed do so," said Mbeki.

Tavano joining Roma

INTERNET, undated

Valencia striker Francesco Tavano will join Roma in January, confirmed the Spanish club's President Juan Soler.

The former Empoli man had been heavily linked with a return to the peninsula, just six months after his switch to Primera Liga, with Roma suggested as his preferred destination, as reiterated by the player's agent in the past few weeks.

"We have found an agreement. Tavano will return to Italy on December 28 and will join Roma on January 4," explained Soler in a press conference, confirming the reports released on Wednesday.

Roma Coach Luciano Spalletti had not answered any questions on Tavano's move after the Giallorossi's win against Torino, but did not deny the rumours, which suggested that the player would not return to Spain after the Christmas holiday.

The 27-year-old, who is cup-tied in Europe, moved to Valencia on a 7-million-pound move this summer, but struggled to adapt to his new life and hopes he will be granted more playing time with the in the capital.

Tavano is expected to move to the capital city club on a loan deal, with the option to buy outright in June.

Betis sack Irureta

AFP, Madrid

Relegation-threatened Spanish First Division side Real Betis sacked coach Javier Irureta on Thursday.

The 59-year-old had only been in charge of Betis since the beginning of the season but despite a 1-0 win over Gimnastica Tarragona on Wednesday both him and the club reached a mutual agreement for him to leave.

"We reached a mutual decision to cancel the contract," said Irureta. "However it was me who first approached them about it. We could have continued working together but it would not have been a good thing to do."

Irureta, who replaced Lorenzo Serra Ferrer, made his name at Deportivo La Coruna who he coached between 1998 and 2005 guiding them to the 2000 national title and the 2002 Spanish Cup.

However the six-times-capped Spanish international was unable to inspire Betis this term who have won just three times in 15 matches and are two points away from safety.

'Hands off Smith'

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson on Friday warned Premiership rivals Everton off a move for striker Alan Smith.

Smith has failed to re-establish himself in United's senior squad since his recovery from an horrific double leg fracture he suffered at Liverpool last February.

And there had been suggestions that Ferguson might be prepared to let the 26-year-old leave.

But Ferguson dismissed the idea, revealing Smith is now nearing full fitness again after turning down the opportunity to travel with the first team squad to West Ham last weekend, and Aston Villa Saturday, to push himself towards first-team duty.

"Yes, that is correct," said Ferguson when asked if United would reject any offer from Everton for Smith.

"Alan is doing really well at the moment.

"We put him on a speed programme, which had an immediate effect and we have seen a tremendous improvement in him over the last month.

"He is certainly not far away now.

"I wanted to take him down to West Ham but he didn't want to go. He just wanted to stay and train on his own. He deserves great credit for that because it is not easy.

"He doesn't want to travel again tomorrow either, so he will be training again."

Alves extends Sevilla stay

REUTERS, Madrid

Sevilla's Brazilian defender Dani Alves has agreed a one-year contract extension that ties him to the club until 2012, the Primera Liga leaders said on Friday.

"This deal proves that both parties are happy with each other and that the player feels valued and recognised by the club," Sevilla sports director "Monchi" Rodriguez told the club Web site.

The player's buy-out clause remained unchanged at 60 million euros.

The 23-year-old, who has been linked with moves to Barcelona and Liverpool, was part of the Brazil side that won the World Youth Cup in 2003.

He joined Sevilla from Bahia in 2002 and has been one of the club's outstanding performers in winning the UEFA Cup last season, and in their rise to the top of the table this month.

Thuram faces month out

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona defender Lilian Thuram will be out of action for a month after suffering a torn thigh muscle. The French World Cup star pulled up in the 60th minute, during the move that led to Atletico Madrid's equaliser in Thursday's 1-1 draw.

The 34-year-old was clearly in pain and asked to be substituted, eventually being replaced by Ludovic Giuly.

Thiago Motta took up his position in the centre of defence, but should be able to return to midfield when Barça next play on January 7.

Spain's winter mini-break comes at a perfect time for the reigning Liga champions, with Thuram bringing the number of defenders with injury concerns to six.

Edmilson, Rafael Marquez, Giovanni van Bronckhorst, Sylvinho and Oleguer Presas all have niggling problems but should return for the trip to Getafe in a fortnight.

Squillaci wary of resurgent Monaco

AFP, Paris

Lyon defender Sebastien Squillaci admitted that his side would be wary of visiting his former club Monaco despite the apparent

gulf that separates the two French first division rivals.

Crisis-ridden 2004 Champions League finalists Monaco lie 14th in the French league, 30 points behind five-time French champions Lyon, who hammered home their dominance on Wednesday with a 3-1 win in their French League Cup quarter-final tie against Nancy.

But Squillaci, who signed from Monaco six months ago, warned that his former club are in the process of turning their season around after a few positive results.

And he knows his former teammates will be gunning for their first win in over four years at the Gerland Stadium.

"I was under contract with Monaco for eight seasons. It's a club that I'll love and respect forever. It will be something special to meet everyone on the pitch again," said the French international.

"It has been sad for me see how their season has gone.

"The officials wanted to rebuild and everyone knows that in football it's never easy to change everything. There have been a lot of new signings, a lot of departures and they needed time to settle down. One thing is sure Monaco are not in their true position today."

"They are starting to recover. I saw quite a bit of their last match against Sochaux (a 3-0 win) and I can say that the quality is there. I was talking to Gael (Givet) just after the match and he was really delighted with the result and the way it was achieved.

"It's obvious that Lyon are not going to take any rival lightly."

Second-placed Lens will be looking to put their 4-0 humiliation at home by Lyon last week behind them as they travel to lowly Nice on Saturday.

Lens are 17 points behind the leaders and will be keen to pull further ahead of St. Etienne, who are just one

point behind them, and travel to Marseille for Friday's only match.

After the French Cup elimination midweek both Sochaux and Nancy, sitting fifth and sixth respectively with just one point separating them, go head to head.

Second-from-bottom Nantes travel to Toulouse with new signing Fabien Barthez not set to play but watch from the stands.

Elsewhere Paris Saint Germain travel to Troyes and Sedan to Valenciennes as Bordeaux host Le Mans and Rennes travel to fellow Bretons Lorient.

La Volpe gets Sarsfield job

AFP, Buenos Aires

Former Mexico coach Ricardo La Volpe has accepted to train Argentine first division side Velez Sarsfield.

He will sign his one-year contract on Friday, club vice-president Raul Gamez confirmed.

La Volpe, 54, last week resigned as coach of Boca Juniors, who were beaten in the play-off match for the Argentine championship title by Estudiantes earlier this month.

Milan striker fails dope test

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan striker Marco Borriello has been suspended after testing positive in a routine doping test, the Italian Football League said in a statement.

The League's disciplinary commission said Borriello was suspended with immediate effect following an announcement from the anti-doping agency of the Italian Olympic Committee that the forward had failed a test carried out after Milan lost 2-1 at home to AS Roma on Nov. 11.

CONI said that Borriello's sample had shown traces of banned substances prednisone and prednisolone -- which indicate the use of cortisone -- while Milan said they were confident the matter would be resolved swiftly.

"A.C. Milan is aware of the provisional suspension of player

Marco Borriello and is sure that will this event will be cleared up soon in the best manner possible," the club said in a statement on their Web site.



MARCO BORRIELLO

Under Italian doping regulations a player is automatically suspended following a positive first sample but no definitive

verdict is issued until after the results of tests on a second sample.

Borriello, used largely as a back-up player by Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, played the last 15 minutes of the game against Roma coming on as a late substitute.

The striker made his Milan debut in 2002 but has subsequently been loaned out by the club and has featured for Empoli, Reggina, Sampdoria and Treviso.

Since returning to Milan for this season he has made seven Serie A appearances scoring once, and played in three Champions League games for the six-times European champions.

The 24-year-old forward played 15 times for Italy's Under-21 national side scoring seven goals.

Italy has a strict anti-doping regime with two players from each team tested after every game in the top two divisions.

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