

Luxemburgo to keep Barca waiting

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 12: Wanderley Luxemburgo, the Brazilian football coach, has not ruled out taking over the reins of Spanish giants Barcelona - but not right away, reports AFP.

Rumours have been circulating in Brazil that Luxemburgo had already signed an agreement with the club, but he called a press conference on Tuesday to clarify his position.

"I am very honoured by Barcelona's interest," he said, but added that he intended to see out his contract with the Brazilian FA until after the next World Cup.

"I want to win the Olympic gold medal in Sydney and the World Cup in South Korea and Japan. Only then will I consider managing a European club," he said.

Rai to call it a day

SAO PAULO, July 12: Rai, the veteran Brazilian midfielder, is to retire from football at the end of the month, reports AFP.

Now a 35-year-old grandfather, the Sao Paulo star told a press conference: "I have thought about this for quite a time. I wasn't sure about quitting because it is a difficult decision to take, but I want to concentrate on personal projects which have nothing to do with football."

The younger brother of another Brazilian star, Socrates, Rai spent the best part of his career with Sao Paulo, winning the Copa Libertadores, the South American club cup, and the Intercontinental Cup in 1992 and 1993.

He was a key figure in the Brazilian World Cup-winning side of 1994 and spent five seasons in France with Paris St Germain before returning to Sao Paulo in 1998.

Real Madrid rope in Munitis

MADRID, July 12: European Champions Real Madrid have signed Spanish international Pedro Munitis Alvarez on a five-year deal from Primera Liga rivals Racing Santander, the club announced here Tuesday, reports AFP.

Details of the transfer were not released although the Spanish press reported that the deal was in the region of 10 million dollars, reports AFP.

"It's a dream come true," said the 25-year-old winger and scorer of the second of Spain's goals in the dramatic 4-3 win over Yugoslavia which enabled Spain to qualify for the Euro 2000 quarter-finals.

Real fought off competition from Spanish champions Deportivo La Coruna, English giants Chelsea as well as Serie A outfit Inter Milan to sign the highly rated Munitis.

He made his international debut in the 9-0 thrashing of Austria in Euro 2000 qualifying last year.

Kaiser plays down Berlin's dream

BERLIN, July 12: Franz Beckenbauer has rejected a demand by Berlin's mayor that the German capital be allowed to stage both the opening game of the 2006 World Cup and the closing one, reports AFP.

"I don't want to anticipate anything but the opening and closing games have never been played in the same stadium and they won't be in 2006 either. We will divide things up nicely," said Beckenbauer, head of Germany's World Cup bid committee Tuesday.

Berlin's Olympic stadium, which began extensive modernisation renovations last week, has been designated as the venue for the final, while Munich's Olympic stadium is likely to get the tournament opener.

Beckenbauer has also renewed his criticism of the Frankfurt-based satirical magazine Titanic which faxed hoax bribes to FIFA delegates at last week's Zurich conference.

"You can't get any more primitive than that," said Beckenbauer. "It was a really bad joke because the bribery letter was initially taken at face value abroad. This act of stupidity really left a bitter after taste for us amid our success."

FIFA and the German Football Federation are looking at whether they can take legal steps against Titanic.

"I don't think there is any way around it. FIFA and those who voted for us expect it," Beckenbauer said.

Beckenbauer rejected moves though to have him take over as German Football Federation (DFB) president as well. Current DFB boss Egidius Braun is preparing for a heart bypass operation and plans to step down in April leaving a vacuum at the top which VfB Stuttgart president Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder is primed to fill.

"A double function as president of the DFB and president of the World Cup organising committee - that's just not on. It's so much work. Both are actually full time jobs. You can't share them," added Beckenbauer.

Crespo shatters transfer mark



ROME, July 12: Hernan Crespo, Argentine international striker, has signed for Italian rivals Lazio in a world record deal worth 54 million dollars, club president Sergio Cragnotti confirmed Tuesday, reports AFP.

In exchange Portugal's Sergio Conceicao and Argentine Mathias Almeyda will be moving to Parma as makeweights in the deal, but Chilean international Marcelo Salas, who was reportedly part of the deal stays with the Italian champions.

The transfer fee of 110 billion lire (54 million dollars) is the highest ever for a transfer, and keeps Crespo at Lazio for five years. The player will receive a salary of 4.4 million dollars per season.

The transfer eclipses the 100 billion lire (49 million dollars) Inter Milan paid to Lazio for Italy striker Christian Vieri in June 1999.

The arrival of Crespo comes several days after the purchase of his compatriot Claudio Lopez from Champions League finalists Valencia of Spain.

Sergio Conceicao was signed from Portuguese club Porto for 8.8 million dollars last season and after fine performances for his country in the Euro 2000 finals, is currently valued at 18 million dollars.

Lazio have already lined up Dutch international Boedewijn Zenden, currently with Barcelona, as a replacement.

The Rome-based club already have a strong forward line with Salas, young Italian Simone Inzaghi and Croatian Alen Boksic, who is still in talks with UEFA champions Galatasaray of Turkey.



ON TOP OF THE WORLD: An AFP file photo of Argentine international striker Hernan Crespo who has become the world's costliest transfer ever after moving to Serie A champions Lazio from Parma for a fee worth 54 million dollars.

French off-season transfers

PSG ready to set the pace



PARIS, July 12: Ambitious Paris St Germain, back in the Champions League and determined to mount a title challenge, have dominated dealings in the off-season transfer market in France, reports Reuters.

Now negotiating with Real Madrid to bring striker Nicolas Anelka back to France, PSG have already made five major signings as they revamp their squad ahead of their opening French league clash with Strasbourg on July 28.

Marseille pair Peter Lucin and Stephane Dalmat have cost a combined 160 million francs (23.5 million dollars) while goalkeeper Lionel Letizi, signed from Metz as a replacement for veteran Bernard Lama, had a 40 million franc (6 million dollar) price tag.

The Paris club have also signed midfielder Sylvain Distin from Gueugnon and Bernard Mendy from Caen in a spending spree that will be unsurpassed in French league history if a 200 million French francs (29 million dollars) Anelka deal goes through next week.

"It has been a sensible buying campaign," said club president Laurent Perpere. "All our signings have been talented young players."

Lucin and Dalmat both have Champions League experience with Marseille and are looking forward to repeating the exercise with PSG who failed to win a trophy last season.

"PSG is a super club to join," said Dalmat. "Everything here is very professional, very well organised. I'm looking forward to playing in the Champions League again and I think my experience should help."

With an already solid squad which includes efficient Brazilian striker Christian and Nigerian international midfielder Jay Jay Okocha, PSG look a much-improved side from last season.

Among the players who have

exited the Parc des Princes are Lama, striker Mickael Madar and fringe players Nicolas Las-palles, Bruno Carotti and Edwin Murati.

League champions Monaco, also building for a Champions League campaign, have been similarly busy in the transfer market although several of the men who helped them to the title have departed.

Striker David Trezequet has joined Juventus, goalkeeper Fabien Barthez has gone to Manchester United, defender Willy Sagnol to Bayern Munich

after a spell with Parma.

Lyon, last season's big spenders and France's third Champions League contenders this year, have agreed to sign French international defender Frederic Delu from Barcelona.

They have also sealed deals for athletic striker Steve Marlet from Auxerre and midfielder Marc-Vivien Foe from England's West Ham United but they have lost striker Frederic Kanoute to the London club.

Marseille's new Brazilian coach Abel Braga faces a tough first season at the club after no fewer than 16 players, including Dalmat, Lucin, Poratto, Arsenal signing Robert Pires, Laurent Blanc and Christophe Dugary, have left over the past 12 months.

Signings hoping to counter-balance the exits include powerful defender Bruno N'Gotty from AC Milan, midfielder Mickael Marcellig from Strasbourg, Swedish striker Klas Ingesson from Bologna, Zoumana Camara from Inter Milan and Manuel de Santos from relegated Montpellier.

Young Brazilian playmaker Adriano will put pen to paper later this week, while the club are also reportedly interested in Brazilian striker Oseas and English-based pair Marcel Desailly of Chelsea and Gilles Grimandi of Arsenal.

Abel has named his priorities, told us the players he wants - and we have tried to comply," said Marseille general manager Eric di Meco.

It nonetheless looks like a season of rebuilding, and possibly a fight against relegation for the second straight season, for France's most popular club.

New Auxerre coach Daniel Roland, who replaces the legendary Guy Roux, has made an astute signing in talented young defender Jean-Alain Bounsom from relegated Le Havre but may find it hard to plug the gaps created by the departures of players like Marlet and fellow forward Bernard Diomede, who has joined Liverpool.

Key signings include prolific striker Shabani Nonda from Rennes, goalkeeper Stephane Poratto from Marseille, defender Franck Jurietti from Bastia and experienced striker Xavier Gravelaine from relegated Le Havre, while Ousmane Dabo returns to the French league

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Mbeki blasts Europe

PORT ELIZABETH, South Africa, July 12: President Thabo Mbeki has dismissed suggestions that South Africa was not ready to host the 2006 World Cup, reports AFP.

He told a meeting of his African National Congress on Tuesday that it was Europe who was not ready to accept Africa.

Mbeki endorsed the response from South Africa's bid committee after losing last week's vote in Zurich to Germany that "South Africa and Africa were fully ready to host the Soccer World Cup Finals," as authenticated by the FIFA technical committee.

"The real question is when will some in Europe be ready to accept that Africa is part of the global human family, and not an irrelevant appendage whose marginalisation is, to some in developed Europe, an acceptable outcome," he said.

Mbeki said the FIFA decision "shattered the hopes of our people and the peoples of Africa."

South Africa's bid focused largely on the fact that the World Cup finals have never been played in Africa.

The South African bid committee was this week taking legal advice on the possibility of challenging the FIFA vote, particularly the abstention of New Zealander Charles Dempsey despite a mandate from his federation to vote for South Africa should England be eliminated.

Had Dempsey voted for South Africa the vote would have settled at 12 each allowing FIFA president Sepp Blatter to cast the deciding vote. Blatter indicated before the vote that he supported the event going to Africa.

Blatter for an overhaul

ZURICH, July 12: FIFA president Sepp Blatter on Tuesday called for an overhaul of the World Cup selection process in order to ensure a fairer distribution of football's premier sporting event by continent, reports AFP.

In a letter addressed to the executive committee of football's world governing body, Blatter outlined a new format to assure the World Cup was not always awarded to the same continents.

Calls for an overhaul of the selection procedure have increased since last Thursday's controversial vote in which the 2006 World Cup was awarded to Germany ahead of South Africa by a narrow 12-11 vote.

The selection of Germany was the tenth time that football's biggest extravaganza has been awarded to Europe while Africa have yet to host the event.

In Blatter's letter he suggested:

- the introduction of a principal which would distribute the competition between the continents;
- a limitation of the number of candidates from each continent;
- the simultaneous appointment of the hosts for the next two World Cups;
- combining the three principals or the adoption of new legislation which would serve the same purpose.

FIFA also indicated that they had received a letter from the African Confederation with principals along the same lines as Blatter's proposals.

FIFA's executive committee will meet next on August 3 to "discuss openly all possibilities that would permit FIFA to adopt new policies."

Sutton moves to Celtic

GLASGOW, July 12: Chris Sutton formally completed his 6 million pound (9.6 million dollar) record Scottish transfer to Celtic from Chelsea Tuesday after he passed the medical, reports AFP.

27-year-old striker will now join up with his Parkhead colleagues and manager Martin O'Neill in Denmark ahead of Wednesday night's friendly against FC Copenhagen.

Sutton replaces Leeds-bound Mark Viduka in the Celtic attack after failing to make an impression at Stamford Bridge following his 10 million pound (16 million dollars) transfer from Blackburn a year ago.

Sutton is excited by the challenge ahead as he aims to prove last season was only a blip and force his way back into the England squad.

He becomes new Celtic boss O'Neill's first signing and replaces Israeli midfielder Eyal Berkovic as the most expensive purchase ever made north of the border.

Sutton said: "As soon I spoke to Martin I knew that I wanted to be involved with a club of Celtic's standing and I am excited about the prospect of playing alongside quality players."

"I am delighted to have signed for Celtic and very much look forward to playing in front of such a massive, passionate and knowledgeable support."

"Celtic's history and tradition are well known to me and I consider myself very privileged to have the opportunity to play for such a fantastic club."

O'Neill insists Sutton will demonstrate the ability which saw him establish himself as one of the Premiership's leading talents at Blackburn despite losing confidence at Chelsea.

He said: "I am delighted to have signed a player of the quality of Chris Sutton. He has played at the highest level as an England international and will bring valuable skills and experience to Celtic."

'Reggae Boyz' sans the beat

KINGSTON, Jamaica, July 12: The loss of five British-based players from the lineup has left Jamaica's 'Reggae Boyz' reeling as they open World Cup 2002 qualifying on Sunday at St. Vincent and the Grenadines, reports AFP.

Jamaica, which brought the Caribbean rhythms to the 1998 World Cup finals in France, could have a difficult time repeating as one of three qualifiers from North America.

The first departure was Fitzroy Simpson, who quit on Thursday. Angered by the manner in which a suspension was handed down by new technical director Clovis de Oliveira, Simpson announced that he was retiring from international football.

Within four days, the Jamaicans lost Frank Sinclair, Michael Johnson, Darren Moore and Marcus Gayle.

Apart from Gayle, who had not played with the team lately, the others were booted from the team for disciplinary reasons. Sinclair, who plays for Leicester City in the English Premier League, is injured. Moore was recalled by his club, Portsmouth. And Johnson faces an uncertain future as de Oliveira says he has enough players to fill his position at left fullback.

Gayle, who captained the team earlier this year, has joined Simpson by quitting.

Horace Burrell, president of the Jamaica Football Federation, confirmed that Gayle had packed it in and planned to return to Wimbledon, which has

been relegated to the lower divisions.

The Jamaicans, who qualified third behind the United States and Mexico four years ago, are not without weapons, however.

Jamaica outscored arch-rival Trinidad and Tobago 4-2 in an away friendly in their final warm-up for their regional round-robin competition. Three goals from Omandi Lowe and another by Jermaine Johnson were enough to better Dwight Yorke's double strike.

The top two teams from each of three four-team groups advance into next year's final qualifying round, where three of six teams will advance to the 2002 World Cup Finals co-hosted by Japan and South Korea.

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Youngest victim laid to rest

MARONDERA, Zimbabwe, July 12: The youngest victim of Zimbabwe's soccer stampede, six-year-old Dean Fidesi, was laid to rest Tuesday in the dusty Paradise cemetery in this small town southeast of the capital Harare, reports AFP.

A simple wooden coffin covered with a white cloth and two wreaths held the body of the young football fan, trampled to death Sunday as stampeding crowds rushed to get out of Harare's National Stadium after police fired tear gas.

Father Alec Fidesi told mourners: "I carried my dead son in the confusion at the stadium, thinking he had just run short of fresh air but would recover. Little did I know that he was dead."

Dean was among at least 13 fans who died in Zimbabwe's worst sports tragedy ever.

He was a young soccer fan to be reckoned with, said speakers at the grave site.

He hardly ever missed football games, even the social soccer matches played by his father's workmates, mourners said.

He even had nicknames for all the players in the 'Boozers' (father's colleagues) team," said Wendy Moadzwa, who works with his father at the independent Zimbabwe weekly Financial Gazette.

Tearful relatives found it hard to speak, but Alec Fidesi vowed his family's love for soccer would not be changed by Dean's death.

"I will continue to be as great a soccer fan as I was, I will continue going to watch matches," he said.

"I love soccer so much that the death of Dean will not stop me from going to watch soccer matches," he said.

"I am urging the father, Mr Fidesi, to continue coming to watch soccer with young Jean, remember there is also women's soccer," Peter Mukuna said.

Football's world governing body FIFA have banned the use of Harare's National Stadium for international matches until further notice.

FIFA has criticised the giant Chinese-built sports stadium's security arrangements.

The body have given ZIFA until next Monday to submit its report on the tragedy.

Zimbabwe police have also been sharply criticised for their heavy-handed action in letting off the tear gas.

The trouble began when disgruntled Zimbabwe fans threw bottles onto the pitch after South Africa scored its second goal in the World Cup qualifying match.

Zimbabwe is due to play Seychelles at the weekend in Zimbabwe.

That match will take place at Harare's Rufaro stadium, ZIFA's acting chief executive Ndumiso Gumede told AFP.



Gunners' new Brazilian denied entry in UK



LONDON, July 12: Arsenal's intended Brazilian signing Edson Barboza was caught in possession of a counterfeit Portuguese passport on Tuesday and refused entry to Britain, according to a Home Office spokesman, reports AFP.

"A Brazilian national was refused entry to the UK yesterday afternoon at 13:30 GMT and was returned to Sao Paulo, Brazil that evening."

"He was found to be in possession of a counterfeit Portuguese passport," said the spokesman.

As a Brazilian national, Edson, from Brazilian club Corinthians, needs a work permit to play football in Britain, but during negotiations over the four-year deal to the London side which was announced 10 days ago, he claimed to also have a Portuguese passport.

By claiming Portuguese nationality, Edson could be considered a European Union (EU) national, and therefore would not need a work permit.

An Arsenal spokeswoman insisted that Edson had dual nationality, but refused to comment further on the intended six million pound (9.1 million dollars) signing.

In an Arsenal statement released on Wednesday morning, the club said it and the player had acted in good faith.

"Unbeknown to both parties, there was a problem with Edson's passport and consequently, he has returned to Brazil where the situation can be resolved."

"We hope to have a clearer indication in the next few days of when he can come back to Britain and join up with the club," Arsenal added.

However, as the player has not yet made his international debut, it is unlikely that the Home Office will look kindly on his application to play in the Premiership.

The current rule is that foreign recruits outside the EU must have played in 75 per cent of their recent home country internationals.

"I really don't know what happened. I was told I did not need a visa," Edson told The Sun.

"I'm going back to Brazil to sort out the problem and hope to return in about a week," he added.

According to the Home Office spokesman, a counterfeit passport is "completely false", in comparison to a forged passport which is a doctored legitimate passport.



Harare qualifier South Africa not awarded points: FIFA

JOHANNESBURG, July 12: The match commissioner who said South Africa had been awarded the points from an abandoned World Cup tie in Zimbabwe last weekend has been overruled by the organisers, reports AFP.

Egyptian Hisham al-Azmy told the South African Broadcasting Corporation the three points would go to South Africa, who were leading 2-0 when the match was halted with eight minutes left due to crowd trouble.

Andreas Herren, a spokesman for world governing body FIFA, was reported here as saying no decision had been made about the Group E match because several issues needed to be probed.

For the moment the match is considered abandoned and will remain so until the situation has been examined by the World Cup organising committee, the official said.

At least 13 people, including several children, died in a stampede to get out of the National Stadium in Harare when police fired tear gas after bottles were flung on the pitch.

— AFP photo