

Athers thinking of retirement?

LONDON, Oct 11: Former England skipper Michael Atherton has rejected a new contract at Lancashire to throw up speculation on his retirement, the Press Association reported on Wednesday, says AFP.

The 32-year-old Atherton is expected to discuss a new deal after the series against Australia next year.

Atherton, who made his debut at Lancashire in 1987, recently hinted in a magazine interview that he may make next season his last.

Old Trafford chairman Jack Simmons said: "He has put matters on hold. There is talk of retiring, but I can't see him packing up."

Donald tonic for Pollock

NAIROBI, Oct 11 (Internet report): Shaun Pollock greeted the return of Allan Donald to the South African team with delight, after the Proteas' premier strike bowler left the one-day arena after the 1999 World Cup.

It is no coincidence that Pollock described the South African bowling performance as "one of the best I have seen from a South African side I have been part of". The inimitable Allan Donald was wearing green and gold again, and the South African captain made the point: "Having AD back is so important to us."

Pollock regarded his own bowling performance as one of the best of his career. With Telemachus also firing, and Boje keeping a tight rein on the English batsmen, it's no wonder that the English batsmen were never able to break the shackles.

Another player who is "back" is Jonty Rhodes, if only in the sense that he pulled off a direct hit after his trademark had appeared to go missing from his game for a while.

So, all in all, any team that beats the South African team in this tournament will have to be at peak form.

Beckham to see knee specialist

LONDON, Oct 11: David Beckham is expected to see a specialist on Wednesday who will determine whether he will need an operation on his injured left knee, reports AFP.

The Manchester United midfielder withdrew from England's World Cup qualifier in Finland on Wednesday because of the problem.

Beckham started the match against Germany last Saturday despite still feeling the effects of the injury, picked up in England training. But he aggravated the knee during the 1-0 defeat when he fell awkwardly.

Beckham played all but seven minutes of the match before being replaced by Ray Parlour.

The Old Trafford star was then pulled out of the squad travelling to Helsinki so he could stay at home for treatment.

He will now almost certainly be sidelined for United's match against Premiership leaders Leicester on Saturday.

De Bilde on loan to Villa

LONDON, Oct 11: English Premiership side Aston Villa have signed Sheffield Wednesday striker Gilles de Bilde on loan for two months, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old Belgian international is set to go straight into the squad for Saturday's clash at Arsenal.

The former PSV Eindhoven frontman said that he was keen to use his time at Villa Park to kick-start his career.

"This is a nice opportunity for me," he said. "The last few weeks have not been the happiest of my career. What I need is to play for Villa and find my sharpness again."

Villa have taken De Bilde on loan while they wait for the European Union to make a decision on whether or not to scrap transfer fees.

That decision is due on October 31, and De Bilde added: "It is an opportunity to get a permanent deal and that is very exciting."

Olympic stadium interests both

ROME, Oct 11: Serie A rivals and co-tenants at the Olympic stadium, Lazio and AS Roma remain interested in the purchase of the stadium, the club's respective presidents Sergio Cragnotti and Franco Sensi confirmed Tuesday, reports AFP.

The rivals united when questioned by journalists about a possible deal at a conference at the Economics and Commerce Faculty of the La Sapienza University.

Cragnotti said: "The question of the stadium remains an open one for us. The State Council has given the green light for the sale of the Olympic stadium. We are therefore counting on having negotiations which could take shape in the next few days."

Sensi agreed, saying: "Our interest is in owning the stadium. In summary, we are available and we are waiting for the signals."

The travelling coaches' tale

BEIRUT, Oct 11 (AFP) Kevin Keegan may have been brutally honest and admitted he wasn't up to international management but there are two coaches preparing for the Asian Cup that simply revel in it.

For journeyman footballer read journeyman coach as Bora Milutinovic



BORA MILUTINOVIC

Milutinovic, the flamboyant Serb coach of China, and Japan's current boss Frenchman Philippe Troussier, known as 'The White Witch Doctor' for the magic he wove in a long stay in Africa, once more lead teams into a major finals.

A World Cup finals these days would not be complete without Milutinovic, who has been present at the past four.

He guided hosts Mexico to a quarter-final shootout loss to

Germany in 1986 and minnows Costa Rica to an unlikely appearance in the second round in 1990, which included a 1-0 humiliation of Scotland.

He worked similar magic with hosts the United States in 1994 when they lost narrowly to Brazil in the last 16 and also took Nigeria to the same stage in 1998.

While Milutinovic has been primarily hired to secure China's first ever appearance at a World Cup finals, a disappointing showing here would certainly have the Chinese football chiefs twitching. Milutinovic's predecessor, Bobby Houghton, was fired earlier this year.

The ever unflappable Milutinovic, however, appears not to be the least bit concerned and has played down China's hopes.

"The results here don't matter so much as that the players start to learn to play my way," he said.

"That will prepare them for the more important business of the World Cup qualifiers," he added.

Just as a World Cup finals would not be the same without Milutinovic so it goes for Troussier and the African Cup of Nations finals. Troussier's love affair with African football ran out following the debacle of South Africa's appearance at the 1998 World Cup finals.

Troussier, who pulled off some amazing strokes during his time in Africa none more so than coaching minnows Burkina Faso to the 1998 Nations Cup semi-finals, could not cope with the relaxed attitude of the South Africans, who similarly revolted against his iron discipline and frequently broke curfew.

Thus the two modern day footballing coach versions of the explorer Marco Polo enter their next challenge with very different expectations - the question is whether both will be standing come the end of the finals or whether they will be for hire once again.

He has also had his problems in Japan and despite leading the youth side to the World Youth final last year it was predicted that his contract would not be renewed in July.

He saved himself at the final hour however when the senior side performed creditably in the King Hassan Cup in Morocco, dominating world champions



PHILIPPE TROUSSIER

France for a large portion of a 2-2 draw.

Buoyed by that and a penalty shootout loss in the Olympic quarter-finals to the United States Troussier was moved to make a bold prediction.

"We will get the Asian Cup back in Japan," he said.

While Ranieri may have declared his intention to have a British backbone to his side upon his arrival at Chelsea, it was to Jovanovic that he has turned after Di Matteo's injury away to St Gallen last month.

The midfielder caught Ranieri's eye while he was in charge at Valencia a couple of seasons ago and he has scored 31 goals in more than 200 appearances in 'La Liga'.

He has also won 53 caps for Yugoslavia, with eight international goals to his name, and although there may soon be major changes to the transfer system, Chelsea needed to find an immediate replacement for Di Matteo.

The London club's managing director Colin Hutchinson said: "Obviously with the unfortunate injury to Roberto, who is likely to be out for the entire season, we needed to strengthen the squad in midfield."

"He (Jovanovic) is a player that Claudio Ranieri knows very well from his time in Spain and he has a very high regard for him."

"With Deportivo having signed three midfielders during the summer, they had an abundance of players in that position and so it was the correct time for him to move."

"We saw them play in a four team tournament in China earlier this year and China beat them 4-1. But they had five or six players missing so I'm not going to read too much into that," he said.

"If they're anything like most other teams from this region they'll be pretty useful. But we're confident of being able to get a result," he added.

Iraq's preparations for Lebanon 2000 have been hampered by the continuing United Nations sanctions imposed against Baghdad following the 1991 Gulf conflict, which have limited Iraq's exposure to international football.

New coach Milan Zivadinovic is quietly confident the Iraqis can improve upon their 1996 quarter-final exit in the United Arab Emirates.

"Our preparations have been good and we are sure that we can do well in this tournament," Zivadinovic said following a training session Monday.

"We know it will be difficult but we are confident that we can get to the second round," he added.

In Group B, Japan's arch-rivals and 2002 World Cup co-hosts South Korea face a tricky opening pool featuring China, Kuwait and Indonesia.

South Korea and China kick-off the group in Tripoli on Friday, with Kuwait and Indonesia playing later in the day.

The top two teams from each group progress automatically to the quarter-finals, with the best two third-placed teams joining them in the last eight.

A successful opening Thursday will be greeted with a sigh of relief from harassed organisers.

Planning for the tournament has been beset by problems ever since Lebanon were named as hosts for the competition four years ago.

Israeli bombing of Lebanon raised security fears earlier this year, and in August furious Asian Football Confederation officials threatened to shift the tournament elsewhere if work

on stadia was not completed in time.

A rush to finish building venues in Tripoli and Saida was eventually successful, although the issue of security has been on the agenda again this week as the explosive Middle East crisis escalated.

The kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah guerrillas cranked up speculation of a military backlash by Israel and on Sunday Israeli fighter jets roared over Beirut for the first time since raids earlier this year.

AFC officials have talked down the possibility of any disruption to the tournament however.

"We remain focused on staging a successful tournament," AFC general secretary Peter Velappan said. "We have been assured that there is no problem with security and we are happy to trust the word of the Lebanese authorities," he added.



Iranian Ali Karimi (L) is in control against teammate Hamed Kavianpour during a practice session at the Safa Stadium in Beirut on October 10.

FIFA rankings Brazil remains world's best

ZURICH, Switzerland, Oct 11 (AFP): Brazil are still the world number one footballing nation, according to the new FIFA world rankings published Wednesday.

Brazil beat Venezuela 6-0 in World Cup qualifying at the weekend but world and European champions France have only drawn their last three matches.

RANKINGS:

TEAM	POINTS
1. Brazil	822
2. France	801
3. Argentina	764
4. Czech Republic	753
5. Spain	745
6. Italy	740
7. Portugal	726
8. Germany	719
9. Netherlands	719
10. Yugoslavia	711
11. Mexico	700
12. Norway	692
13. Romania	691
14. Paraguay	689
15. England	672
16. Colombia	668
17. Croatia	665
18. USA	648
19. Chile	642
20. Denmark	639

Jokanovic joins Chelsea

LONDON, Oct 11: Yugoslav international Slavisa Jokanovic on Tuesday became Chelsea head coach Claudio Ranieri's first major signing since his arrival at Stamford Bridge, reports AFP.

Jokanovic, 32, was signed for 1.7 million pounds (2.38 million dollars) on a two-year contract to end the club's search for a central midfielder following Roberto di Matteo's broken leg which is expected to rule him out of action for the rest of the season.

He arrives from Spanish club Deportivo La Coruna, where he had only been for one season after four years previously spent with Tenerife as well as two years with Oviedo.

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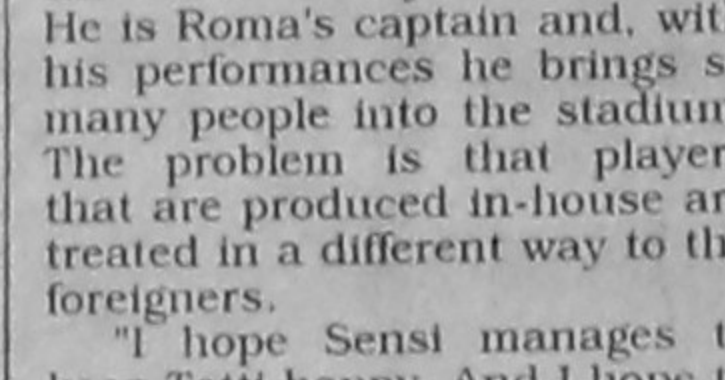
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Serie A foreigners get on local nerves

MILAN, Oct 11: Italy's leading players and coaches are joining forces in a bid to curb the dominance of foreigners in Serie A, reports AFP.

The coaches - or at least those involved with the national set-up - are backing plans to limit the number of foreigners to five in a bid to revitalise domestic talent.

And Italy's emerging crop of players are angry at the preferential pay deals given to foreign stars at the expense of local talent.

The feelgood factor is back in Italian football after they came within 30 seconds of winning Euro 2000 and with a brilliant 3-0 drubbing of Romania Saturday night winning rave reviews for new national team coach Giovanni Trapattoni.

And that positive sentiment is fuelling the sentiment that Serie A does not need to be so dependent on foreign talent.

The likes of Alessandro Nesta, Francesco Totti and Filippo Inzaghi are making it abundantly clear that they have had enough of being considered the poor relations of Italian football.

Lazio defender Nesta Tuesday publicly backed the demands for a wage increase from Totti, currently the golden boy of Italian football and who

very good players now in Serie B.

Inzaghi backs the moves to limit the number of foreign players to five, saying: "The cap of five foreigners is a sensible one, the clubs would only buy the really strong (foreign) players and that would give space to the Italian talent."

That argument is backed by Trapattoni who like his predecessor Dino Zoff believes a limit on the number of foreigners would be of benefit to the Italian national team.

Former AC Milan, Inter, Juventus, Bayern Munich and Fiorentina boss Trapattoni read the riot act last week to the Serie A clubs.

He said: "When there were only a few (foreigners) people like (Gianni) Rivera and (Giuseppe) Mazzola had the possibility to emerge."

"Now the situation has changed and the clubs must understand that the youth schemes are very important."

"We have the under-21 European champions, an Olympic Games campaign where we lost to Spain but performed very creditably but nonetheless so many very good (Italian) players are kept on the sidelines."

"We want a pact of honour between the clubs to limit foreigners, to five for example. When I was with Fiorentina last year I always chose a young player rather than a foreigner."

There will be no special envoys. No one except me will speak to any prospective candidate.

"The decision as to who will be the next England coach is actually about the long-term success of the England national team and therefore it is vital that we get the right man for the job."

"What that means is that we will absolutely not be bounced into making a quick decision. We have to learn from the mistakes of the past and find the right person for the job."

"We will ensure that we have a confirmed name before Christmas. The chairman of the FA is naturally fully involved in this process."

He dismissed one report claiming that Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger had been approached by the FA with a view to managing the England side in Finland.

And despite a stream of supposed prospective candidates already having distanced themselves from the post, he added: "To all those who have turned us down, with all due respect, I wasn't aware you'd been offered the job."

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