

Sport

Petit happy at Barca

PARIS, Jan 13: Dissatisfied French midfielder Emmanuel Petit, left out of the Barcelona first team, warned Saturday that he would not stay beyond this season with the Spanish side if he failed to gain a team place, reports AFP.

Petit, who was signed by the Catalan giants from Arsenal in the off-season, is unhappy because of his lack of playing time under Barca coach Llorente Serra Ferrer, but said he would stick with the club until season's end.

"To leave mid-season would amount to a failure in my eyes," said the 30-year-old world and European champion.

"Despite offers made to me from English and French clubs I've decided to stay until June."

But he warned: "If between now and then I find that I'm not given the chance of expressing myself on the field I'll study these offers closely. In the meantime I'm not going to comment further on my situation."

French sides Monaco, Lyon and Paris Saint Germain along with English outfits Manchester United and Fulham are among the clubs reported to be interested in signing the player.

Villa have an Angel

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 13: Colombian international striker Juan Pablo Angel finally got the go ahead for his 9.5 million pounds (14.5 million dollars) transfer from River Plate to English Premiership club Aston Villa on Friday, the Argentinian club said, reports AFP.

The 25-year-old, scorer of 30 goals in 40 appearances for River Plate in the past two seasons, had been expected to move to last season's FA Cup finalists - who are paying out a record fee for the striker - in late December, but the transfer was complicated by the fact that Angel's agent Gustavo Mascarini owned half of his contract.

The agent's demands for a fee in excess of one million dollars on top of half of the transfer fee initially led world football governing body FIFA to block the move.

However, River Plate president David Pintado said that the final snag had been sorted out.

The deal was completed this morning (Friday).

The only problem that remained to be resolved was a clause stipulating that in the event that Angel is transferred in the future, he would not be allowed to join an Argentinian club.

"In the end, it was agreed that if he returns to Argentina, River Plate have an exclusive option on him," he added.

Angel's signing ends a long search by Villa coach John Gregory for a striker which included failed bids for Celta Vigo's South African international striker Benny McCarthy and Liverpool's out of favour England international Robbie Fowler.

Just ask Asprilla

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 13: Controversial Colombian striker Faustino Tino Asprilla knocked a player out cold after an opponent threw two punches at him - and said he was used to such rough and tumble after two years of 'war-like' football in England with Newcastle, reports AFP.

Asprilla, who had two up-and-down years with Newcastle under Kevin Keegan and Kenny Dalglish before rejoining Italy's Parma, is now with Brazilian side Fluminense and lost his cool after a defender twice deliberately hit him in a so-called friendly on Thursday.

Sports daily Lance quoted Asprilla as saying that there was only so much provocation anyone could take.

"Why should I be a saint and keep silent when people thump me?" asked the Colombian, who was sent home from the France 98 World Cup for indisipline.

Asprilla said a defender from modest outfit Friburgense had twice hit him in off the ball incidents and he felt he had to defend himself.

"It made my blood boil. It was only a training match but they were playing like it was the World Cup final."

"But football's a man's game. I guess it's part of the game. But when they hit me off the ball I get mad," though he said the two men had had a friendly word and an embrace at the end.

All for nothing

MARSEILLE, France, Jan 13: Marseille striker Ibrahima Bakayoko looked set to leave the club after paying his own way back from the Ivory Coast on Friday to find he was not in the squad for their match against Toulouse, reports AFP.

The 26-year-old former Everton player, who made his name at Montpellier before his move to England, was close to tears at training after returning when the troubled west African country's 2002 African Nations Cup qualifier against Sudan was postponed.

"I'm not even in the squad. I came back for this," said Bakayoko.

"I telephoned to tell them I was coming back and nothing was said," he added.

Bakayoko, who was placed on the transfer list in the summer before winning a reprieve from then coach Abel Braga but has failed to impress his successor Javier Clemente, began to vent his fury at the Marseille coaching staff but was led away by teammate Djamel Belmadi.

Maradona says it all



ROME, Jan 13: Argentine football legend Diego Maradona took a swipe on Friday at his homeland and praised Cuba, the country that nursed him back to health after his much-documented heart problems last year, reports AFP.

Maradona, appearing on popular gameshow "Dove ti porta il cuore" (go where your heart takes you) slammed Argentina's human rights record which he said compared unfavourably with that of the Communist island state.

"When Argentina voted against Cuba (to back the trade embargo) I was deeply ashamed," he told hostess Milly Lucchetti.

"I felt bad as an Argentine. Argentina has no right to vote against anything because with us 30,000 people have disappeared."

"And in Argentina, people who have no money die, not in Cuba. Cuba is an example."

Maradona also espoused family values when he said he was worried about his daughters Dalma and Giannina now they are reaching the age where they go out at night-time.

"I let Dalma go out at night but at midnight I go and get her. If I ever see her crying because of something a fiance did to her then the fiance would have an accident."

Maradona also lambasted directors of his former club Napoli, ending speculation that he would be given an ambassadorial role for the Italian first division outfit.

Maradona in particular targeted Napoli director Corrado Ferlaino whom he blamed for the collapse of negotiations after he met club president Giorgio Corbelli at a top Rome hotel.

"I gave him another chance," said Maradona in reference to Ferlaino.

"But once again he betrayed me. I am sorry but I can't work at Napoli alongside such a person."

"In December when I came to Rome I had dinner with Ferlaino and brought my family with me."

"I would not have done the same thing for Bill Clinton. In return he has betrayed me again. Ferlaino thinks only of money and not the good of Napoli."

Corbelli was more circumspect in his reaction.

"It was a calm meeting and at the end we decided to take time to think about it," Corbelli said.

"Currently there are not the conditions for the project we have talked about in the last few days," he added.

The Napoli president also defended his boardroom colleague Ferlaino.

"Ferlaino is Napoli Football Club... it is he (Maradona) who wanted this (the split). Napoli must go forward," he said.

The title of the programme might have appeared providential given the heart problems that almost ended his life last year but he was in a good mood, embracing children, juggling a football and then an orange and telling Carlucci "You get more beautiful every time I see you."

Maradona did refer to his brush with death last year.

Pointing up to heaven he said: "The fellow with the beard (God) told me not to die. It's

reassure them."

"I had to phone Argentina to reassure them I had not been shot. I have broad shoulders but it gets worse every time."

The player insisted however that the tax police who had greeted him at Fiumicino had been "very nice".

Maradona's outburst ended any talk of a job with Napoli but he had given a hint of his dis-enchantment with Ferlaino the night before after his shock encounter with the tax authorities.

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man Nasser Ebrahimi, who was given a six-month ban by the Iranian football federation, saying the friendlies would be held in March. It did not say who the other opponent would be.

Iran and the United States have not had diplomatic relations since April 1980, several months after Islamic radicals stormed the US embassy in Tehran and took the staff hostage.

Iranian football manager Sven Goran Eriksson Saturday, swooning in unison after the Swede's polished display at his first full press conference, reported AFP.

Eriksson, who was thrust into the England job six months ahead of schedule after quitting Lazio earlier this week, received glowing reviews across the board after being presented to the press on Friday.

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