

'Zidane, Figo are both great'

APPIANO GENTILE, Italy. Jan 27: Brazilian striker Ronaldo said Friday that he could not pick between France and Juventus playmaker Zinedine Zidane and Portugal and Real Madrid star Luis Figo for the tag of best player on the planet, reports AFP.

Asked about which of the two was the best player in the world, the 24-year-old Inter Milan forward said it was impossible to choose.

"I knew Figo well when we were at Barcelona, he used to come to my house," said the Brazilian.

"But because I said that he deserved to win the Golden Ball it was reported in Brazil that I thought he was better than Zidane even though I did not say that."

"They are both great players, they both play great football."

Zidane last month was named FIFA World Player of the Year - an award twice won by Ronaldo - for the second time while Figo won the Golden Ball award presented by France Football magazine to the best player in Europe.

Seaman not quitting yet

LONDON, Jan 27: Arsenal goalkeeper David Seaman has declared he has no intention of following England teammate Tony Adams into international retirement, reports AFP.

The 37-year-old is expected to find his place increasingly under threat from a younger generation of goalkeeping talent which has emerged.

But while some critics believe it is now time for Sven-Goran Eriksson to look to the future, Seaman will leave the decision to the new England coach ahead of next month's friendly against Spain.

Adams, 34, may have retired from international football to concentrate solely on Arsenal, but Highbury team-mate Seaman declared: "I love playing for England."

"The day that I retire from international football is the day that I retire completely."

Seaman, who faces former club Queens Park Rangers in the FA Cup fourth round on Saturday, is hoping to sign a new one-year extension to his present contract in the next week or so.

"We are talking about another year after this season and it is looking good as far as a new contract is concerned," he told the London Evening Standard.

"Will that take me to the end of my career? My first reaction is 'no' because I am enjoying it too much."

"If I feel like I do now then I will carry on playing. It might be as cover or whatever. I will just take it as it comes."

"I'll know when it is time to retire. You can tell in training. You might not be able to tell so much during games but in training you would be getting found out all the time. When that happens, that will be the time."

Seaman would even consider a move away from Highbury to extend his playing career, although he has no intention of leaving the club just yet.

"I could play somewhere else if it came to that. Hopefully, it won't come to that," he added.

Passarella robbed

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 27: Former Argentinian World Cup-winning captain Daniel Passarella was attacked earlier this month by five armed men who locked him in a bathroom and stole money, police revealed on Friday, reports AFP.

Passarella, Argentina's coach in the 1998 World Cup and currently in charge of Uruguay, was attacked at his country house in Alejandra, northern Argentina.

Police Commissioner Mario Guedes said five men were arrested this week in connection with another offence and had confessed to attacking the 47-year-old, who led Argentina to the World Cup on home soil in 1978.

Ronaldo relishing return



APPIANO GENTILE, Italy. Jan 27: Upbeat Inter Milan star Ronaldo insisted his comeback from a horrific knee injury was all systems go here Friday after paying a light-hearted visit to the club's training camp, reports AFP.

The 24-year-old Brazilian said he would not return to football before March - and maybe not until next season - but is confident his injury nightmare will soon be a thing of the past.

Smiling and making one-liners it was a very different Ronaldo to the one who was stretched from the pitch in tears of agony at Roma's Olympic Stadium last April during his comeback from another lengthy stint out.

"I am feeling very well," he said. "People say they have been missing me. It is a joyful thing for me but I will be happier still when I am back playing."

Asked when that would be Ronaldo said: "I am not worried whether it will be April, March or May - piano, piano (softly, softly). Even if it is next season I am still happy. I miss it (playing) a lot."

With his trademark gap-toothed grin permanently

etched on his face it was a relaxed performance by the Latin American and jokes were not in short supply.

Asked about the plight of Inter, who are struggling in Serie A, he even made a wisecrack about a taboo word at the club - relegation.

"One thing is for sure Inter will not go down to Serie B but I want to see them higher in the table," he predicted.

"Anyway even if we do they will do what they did in Brazil. When Fluminense were relegated they changed the rules and let two more clubs into the top division so they could stay up but that should not be necessary with Inter."



RONALDO

He revealed he was enjoying his training, concentrating on physical work in the morning and kicking the ball in the afternoon.

"He is due to return to Rio for his recuperation and said he was enjoying spending prolonged time with his childhood friends."

"I have one friend who used to be a very good footballer but he eats too much and now he is 150kg," laughed Ronaldo.

He has had some illustrious visitors in Rio, including Pele, widely considered the greatest footballer of all time.

"Pele came to my house," said Ronaldo. "He told me that in 1966 (in the World Cup match at Everton's Goodison Park with Portugal) he was badly injured. The doctors told him he would not play again but six months later he was back and then in 1970 he won the World Cup."

Dubbed 'il fenomeno' (the phenomenon) in Italy, Ronaldo struck an upbeat note when asked if he would be able to regain the same footballing heights that saw him twice named FIFA World Player of the Year.

"Yes, I am still me," he joked. "The doctors have guaranteed me that there are no contrary indications so I am optimistic," he said. "I am confident that I can return as I was before."

Athens Olympic Games Football Tournament

Great Britain bid for glory?

LONDON, Jan 27: A unified Great Britain football team could go for gold at the 2004 Athens Olympics if a bid by sports officials here is successful, reports said Friday, reports AFP.

Simon Clegg, the chief executive of the British Olympic Association, has held talks with the English FA over the possibility of fielding a Great Britain team, the Daily Telegraph and Sun newspapers reported.

He said he wanted to enter the team to help develop promising young British footballers.

"I would like to take a team to Athens because I think we are depriving talented youngsters of the chance to compete at the Games," Clegg was quoted as saying.

Clegg said he met English FA chief executive Adam Crozier earlier this month to discuss the plan.

The English FA has been opposed in the past to a Britain team at the Olympics, fearing it could jeopardise the right of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to compete separately in international competition.

But a FIFA spokesman said there are no barriers to a Great Britain side taking part in the Olympics.

"We would continue to recognise the four British associations separately. They would retain their separate status even if a Great Britain team competed at the Olympics," FIFA communications director Keith Coopey said Friday.

However, Scottish officials have ruled out any involvement in a British side, saying it would jeopardise football at under-21 level.

"From an SFA perspective we would not comply to a British team under any circumstances and there is no prospect whatsoever of a deal taking place," a spokesman said.

"This is a non-starter because you have to look at the practical considerations as well as the national ones."

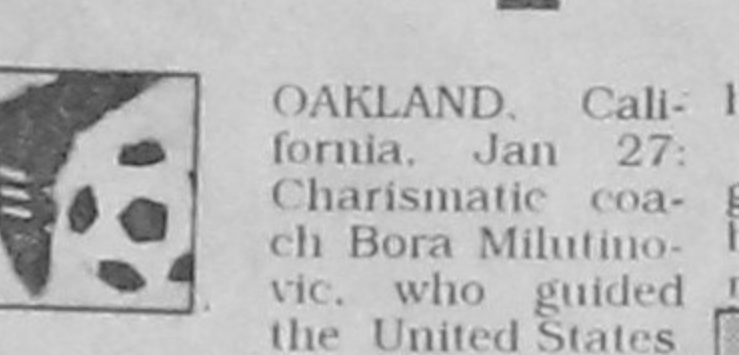
"We have the European Under-21 Championships and from that only four nations go through to the Olympic Games."

"Currently each of the nations - England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland - have Under-21 teams."

"Basically it would mean scrapping the Scotland Under-21 side which is something that would not be considered because it is an essential stepping stone to the full national team."

Britain won football gold medals at the 1900, 1908 and 1912 Olympics but the last team was entered for the 1972 Munich Games, they failed to qualify.

Bora plots US downfall



OAKLAND, California. Jan 27: Charismatic coach Bora Milutinovic, who guided the United States to the second round of the 1994 World Cup, is Stateside again, overseeing his latest World Cup contender, China in a friendly international on Saturday, reports AFP.

"They've given me two years to get the team to the World Cup," the globe-trotting Yugoslav said this week as his players prepared to take on the United States at the Coliseum.

"I'll make my best effort."

Milutinovic is the only man to have managed four countries at the World Cup finals - Mexico, Costa Rica, the United States and Nigeria all of whom progressed to at least the second round with Mexico going out on penalties to Germany in the 1986 quarterfinals.

His task with China is arguably more daunting. When he took them on, the only major global competition the Chinese men had ever qualified for was the 1988 Summer Olympics.

In October, however, the Chinese looked an impressive unit as they went out to even-tinged winners Japan in the Asian Cup semifinals.

Milutinovic said friendlies such as Saturday's match are a key step in China's bid to make the World Cup.

"The US team has improved so much (since he coached here), and it's friendly games like these that help you learn," he said.

US coach Bruce Arena will get his first chance in 2001 to begin preparations for the final round of World Cup qualifying



BORA MILUTINOVIC

in the North and Central America and Caribbean region.

The United States' first match in the final qualifying series is against Mexico in Columbus, Ohio, on February 28.

The US will be competing along with Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Honduras and Costa Rica for one of three places in the 2002 World Cup to be played in South Korea and Japan.

Among those called up by Arena is Brian McBride, who returns to the national side for the first time since September

3, when he scored the game-winning in a World Cup qualifier against Guatemala.

McBride is currently on loan to English first division club Preston North End from Major League Soccer's Columbus Crew.

Four players from the Los Angeles Galaxy - who last Sunday captured the CONCACAF Champions Cup and booked a place in the FIFA World Club Championship - are also included in the squad.

China and the United States last met when the United States travelled to Asia for two games in January and February of 1997.

The Americans lost one match and the second ended in a draw. Overall, the United States have won three of the six meetings between the two countries, with two matches ending in a draw and China capturing one.

Zeman fined

MILAN, Jan 27: Former Napoli coach Zdenek Zeman was on Friday fined 3 million lira (1,429 dollars) by football disciplinary chiefs for disparaging remarks made about his former employers following his sacking in November, reports AFP.

The Czech disciplinarian, who numbers Lazio among his former clubs, made some scathing remarks about the southern outfit - saying among other things that Napoli was not a first division set-up.

French First Division Bordeaux beat Marseille

PARIS, Jan 27: A double from midfielder Laurent Batlles inspired 1999 French champions Bordeaux to an easy 3-0 win on Friday over the team they pipped for that title, Marseille - who now look destined for a long hard fight against relegation, reports AFP.

The win took Bordeaux up to provisional second place a point off leaders Nantes, although the Canaries can restore their four-point advantage should they beat Lyon on Saturday. Marseille remain five points above the relegation zone.

Batlles, who came on as a first-half substitute for the injured Sylvain Legwinski, struck in first-half injury-time and in the 61st minute to take his seasonal total to three, all against Marseille.

Bordeaux World Cup-winning striker Christophe Dugarry had set the ball rolling against his former club with a 24th minute header to maintain Marseille's woeful record of not having won in Bordeaux in 23 years.

Dugarry rose above two Marseille central defenders to head powerfully past keeper Stephane Trevisan from Jerome Bonnisse's corner for his fourth goal of the season and 15th in the French First Division.

Marseille fans responded by throwing missiles onto the pitch with play being held up as the referee handed one of the items, a lighter, to another official.

Batlles, who had scored in the first meeting of the sides earlier in the season, struck in first-half injury time after latching onto Marc Wilmots deflected freekick and outstripping captain Bruno N'Gotty before chipping the ball over Trevisan.

The 25-year-old midfielder put the result beyond doubt just after the hour mark when he tapped home following the best move of the match, Tony Vairelles' superb through ball reached Pavleta who passed inside for the waiting Batlles to finish it off.

Athirson can train with Juve

TURIN, Italy, Jan 27: Brazilian defender Athirson can train with his prospective employers Juventus as of Saturday after the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) granted him a provisional transfer on Friday, reports AFP.

Left-back Athirson - full name Athirson Mazolli de Oliveira - has signed a deal with the Turin giants but his former club Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro is disputing the agreement and world governing body FIFA is investigating the case.

The agreement allows for the player to train with Juventus pending a resolution of the issue and the Stadio Delle Alpi outfit also announced they would formally present the defender to the press on Wednesday.

Three-yr ban for Como assault

ROME, Jan 27: Former Como captain Massimiliano Ferrigno was banned from football for three years on Saturday his punishment for a post-match assault that left an opponent in a coma, fighting for his life, reports AFP.

Ferrigno was banned until December 31, 2003 and was also fined three million lira (1,500 dollars), the Italian football authorities said.

Disciplinary chiefs on Friday had demanded a five-year ban on the player who admitted the assault.

Ferrigno, who also faces a court case to answer charges of grievous bodily harm and failure to assist a person in danger, assaulted Modena player Francesco Bertolotti in the dressing room area after the third division match between the clubs on November 19, won 1-0 by Como.

Bertolotti, married with two children, underwent emergency surgery on the night of the incident but emerged from his coma and is continuing to recuperate although he has been forced to retire from football.

2002 WC qualifier Algeria owe Belmadi one

ALGIERS, Jan 27: first-half goal from Marseille midfielder Djamel Belmadi gave Algeria an impressive 1-0 victory over Namibia on Friday in a World Cup Group C qualifier, reports AFP.

Belmadi converted a 33rd-minute free kick to give the Desert Warriors their first success in a mini-league completed by Egypt, Morocco and Senegal.

Morocco and Algeria have four points each, with the Atlas Lions ahead on goal difference.

Lyon lure Loko

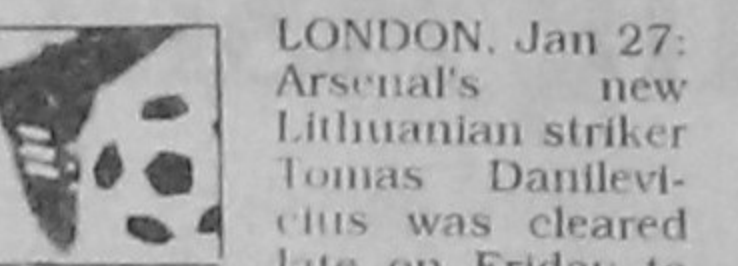
LYON, Jan 27: French First Division side Lyon completed the signings of second division Montpellier star Patrice Loko and Brazilian defender Claudio Cacapa here Friday, reports AFP.

Cacapa, 24, joins the French First Division outfit from Brazilian side Atletico Mineiro on loan for six months while Loko signed for the remainder of the season.



Bordeaux's Tony Vairelles (R) is pursued by Marseille's Frederic Brando in their French First Division encounter on January 26. - AFP photo

Gunners get Danilevicius



LONDON, Jan 27: Arsenal's new Lithuanian striker Tomas Danilevicius was cleared late on Friday to play for the English Premiership team after official checks revealed his Greek passport was genuine, reports AFP.

The confirmation from the Home Office - Britain's interior ministry - on the eve of Arsenal's FA Cup clash with fellow Londoners Queens Park Rangers means Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger can lift his self-imposed ban on playing Danilevicius until his passport was investigated.

The 21-year-old Moscow-born player presented a Greek passport when he arrived at Highbury to sign from Swiss club FC Lausanne last month.

Wenger had hesitated over signing him six months earlier because with only a Lithuanian passport at that time, it was envisaged the player would have difficulties obtaining a British work permit.

But a Greek passport makes him an EU citizen entitled to play in England and he has already made three Arsenal appearances as a substitute including the third round of the FA Cup at Carlisle.

A statement from Arsenal released on Friday said: "Arsenal FC has made an extensive effort to confirm the status of Tomas Danilevicius, in response to recent allegations that his Greek passport was false."

"The club has been liaising very closely with the UK authorities and sent Mr Danilevicius' passport to the Immigration Service for expert examination."

"The Immigration Service has examined Mr Danilevicius' passport and confirmed that the document is not counterfeit and appears to have been genuinely issued by the relevant authorities."

Wenger is still haunted by the problems he had signing 6 million pound (9 million dollar) Brazilian star Edu, who was turned back from London's Heathrow Airport last July when immigration officers discovered his Portuguese passport was a forgery.

That matter was solved two weeks ago when Edu obtained Portuguese nationality through his grandfather.

The French coach said earlier on Friday: "Tomas told us he has family in Greece and I've seen the Greek ID card that he has but if it turns out that the

passport is not correct we will not keep him here."

Danilevicius is the second Premiership import in a day to have the legality of his Greek passport queried.

Newcastle United's Peruvian winger Nolberto Solano claims he has a right to carry one because of a Greek grandfather, though according to the Daily Mail he is only entitled to one if he has a Greek parent.

"Grandparents do not play a role," a Greek consulate official in London told the Mail.

"You have to have a direct parent who is Greek to qualify," the official added.

The sudden interest in players' passports stems from the scandal in France which has led to St Etienne being docked seven points, their president being banned for a year and two players, Brazilian striker Alex and Ukrainian goalkeeper Maxim Levitsky being suspended for two months. The latter had a false Greek passport.

French champions Monaco have also become embroiled in the fiasco over their Chilean international defender Pablo Contreras, whose Italian passport has been questioned despite having an Italian father.

Dubai fed up with Diego



DUBAI, Jan 27: Organisers of a 'jinxed' Dubai visit by Diego Maradona are getting fed up with waiting for the Argentine football legend after he failed to fly in on four different dates, a newspaper reported Friday, reports AFP.

Maradona himself, from a hotel room in Frankfurt, Germany, told the Gulf News that his visit to sign a lucrative testimonial contract to play in an international match for a retired Emirati would still go ahead.

"I've been waiting and waiting and waiting. It's up to Dubai to decide. But I am ready," he said.

Maradona's manager Angelo Bricci laid the blame on "some confusion about the dates and some dispute about many (people) are invited" by the Emirati organisers of the trip.

The star "had contractual commitments in Germany till yesterday so it was not possible to leave for Dubai earlier," he explained.

"Diego, however, has personally apologised for the mix-ups, which were not entirely his fault, and reiterated that he is still keen to visit Dubai," the manager said.

Mohammad Abdul Karim Jalfar, who is organising the testimonial, said his patience had been tested.

"It became embarrassing for us. Here we were laying the red carpet and offering him the best Arab hospitality and each time he let us down," Jalfar told the newspaper.

Earlier this week, Jalfar called for an apology and turned down a request from Maradona "to bring three more people with him on our account," while denying reports a 200,000-275,000 dollar appearance fee had already been signed by fax.

And a local agent for the 40-year-old Maradona, having been burnt several times, declined to venture a new date for the visit, first lined up for January 17, ahead of the March 8 testimonial.

"I will only believe it when I see him at Dubai International Airport coming out of the Emirates flight arriving from Frankfurt," said Mohammad Humaida.



MARADONA

Bundesliga

Schalke stretch lead

BERLIN, Jan 27: FC Schalke 04 extended their lead at the top of the German First Division to four points on Friday with a comfortable 2-0 home win against Hansa Rostock, reports Reuters.

The match went Schalke's way from the fourth minute when midfielder Joerg Boehme bent a 20-metre free kick around Hansa Rostock's defensive wall to make it 1-0.

Schalke were boosted by the return from injury of striker Ebbe Sand and created a series of early chances, giving the away side few opportunities to get back into the game.

But they had to wait until the 66th minute to add to their goal tally when Czech Jiri Nemec scored only his seventh goal in 224 Bundesliga outings.

Schalke top the Bundesliga with 37 points having played a game more than Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund who are joint second on 33. Hansa Rostock stay in 12th place with 21 points.



Schalke's Gerald Asamoah (L) and Hansa Rostock's Kai Oswald fight for possession during their Bundesliga encounter on January 26. - AFP photo



French Patrice Loko (L) and Brazilian Claudio Cacapa shake hands at the Lyon Soccer Club headquarters after they signed for the French First Division club on January 26. - AFP photo