

Pele supports Socrates

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian football legend Pele on Friday backed the nomination of former international midfield playmaker Socrates as the next president of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF).

Elections for the top Brazilian football job will not take place until 2003, but the recent Brazilian parliamentary commission (CPI) inquiry into irregularities in the country's professional football scene have led to criticism of the current football authorities.

"Socrates is someone who has always defended democracy and in my opinion is best suited to the job," Pele told the press here Friday, ruling out that he himself would consider running to replace current president Richardo Teixeira.

Socrates, who is a doctor and studied at the College of Surgeons in Dublin, started in probably one of the most exciting Brazilian teams of all time at the 1982 World Cup finals when they exited in the second round at the expense of ultimate winners Italy.

Socrates, who numbered Junior, Cerezo, Eder, Falcao and Zico among his 1982 teammates, returned like Falcao and Zico for the 1986 finals but was clearly unfit and lost to France on penalties in the quarter-finals.

Zico, who was assistant to Mario Zagallo at the 1998 World Cup finals, has indicated that he might well run for the presidency as well.

Hendry vows to fight ban

REUTERS, Glasgow

Colin Hendry is to appeal against his six-match international ban with the support of the Scottish Football Association, according to the ruling body.

World body FIFA suspended the 35-year-old and fined him 10,000 Swiss francs following an elbowing incident with a San Marino player during a World Cup qualifier in March.



"Colin Hendry will make his appeal to FIFA with the full backing of the SFA," said SFA chief executive David Taylor in a statement on Friday.

"In our opinion, the punishment was excessive and the Disciplinary Committee did not take into account either the extenuating and mitigating circumstances, or the player's previous good record.

Taylor said he and national team coach Craig Brown had spoken with Hendry on Friday to discuss the basis of the appeal.

"The full documentation supporting the appeal will be submitted to FIFA next week, within the timescale required," Taylor added.

"Colin has said he will request a personal hearing from the Appeals Committee.

Macca hopes to be there too

REUTERS, Madrid

Former Liverpool midfielder Steve McManaman has asked permission from his present club Real Madrid to go and see his old teammates face Alaves in the UEFA Cup final in Dortmund on May 16.

"I wouldn't like to miss the final because Liverpool will always be my team," the England midfielder was quoted as saying in Spanish sports daily Marca on Friday.

"Of course I don't know if I will be able to make it because I may have to train with Real on that day, but it will be a very important day for Liverpool."

McManaman said his old teammates had asked for inside information on Spanish side

Alaves, who have surprised many by reaching the final in their debut season in Europe.

"Robbie Fowler asked me about Alaves and I told them about (Liverpool) will need to watch out because they can surprise any team," the Real Madrid player said.

Modest Basque side Alaves have taken this season's tournament by storm, eliminating more experienced sides such as Inter Milan, Girondins Bordeaux and Kaiserslautern en route to the final. Despite their long list of continental honours Liverpool have not won a European trophy since 1984, when they beat AS Roma on penalties to take their fourth European Cup title in eight seasons.

Italy opens its doors

Football

REUTERS, Rome

The walls have started to come down. From now on, Italian soccer clubs will no longer be restricted to fielding a maximum of three non-European Union (EU) players at the same time.

In a sudden, decisive move on Friday night, a court of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) described the federation's so-called 'three-player rule' as "illegal".

From this weekend, a club with four or five non-European

Union (EU) players on its books will be allowed to play them all at the same time.

A separate rule remains in force which restricts the number of non-EU players in any given squad to five, but that too may soon be scrapped.

The Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), which oversees all sport in the country, is examining the limit and appears likely to ditch it before the start of next season.

Friday's decision followed appeals by players at six Serie A and B clubs who claimed the 'three-player rule' discriminated against footballers from outside the EU.

The players included Lazio's Marcelo Salas (Chile), Dejan Stankovic (Yugoslavia) and Hernan Crespo (Argentina), Inter Milan's Alvaro Recoba (Uruguay), Dario Simic (Croatia) and Ivan Cordoba (Colombia) and AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban (Croatia).

Serginho and Dida (Brazil).

Their victory means that 70 Serie A players are now on an equal footing with their Italian and EU team mates.

The court ruling takes Italy a step closer to the situation in the German Bundesliga, where there are no restrictions on foreign players, and the English premier league, where the only limits relate to work permits issued by the government.

But in Spain, the football federation appears to be moving against the trend towards greater openness.

The present limit on non-EU players in the Spanish league is as it was in Italy until Friday, but the Spanish Football

Federation and government have agreed a gradual reduction to three per squad by 2002. Italian clubs largely welcomed Friday's move.

"I'm in agreement with the spirit and substance of the decision," said Juventus coach Carlo Ancelotti. "We live in a multiethnic society these days and the rule was outdated."

AC Milan director general Ariado Braidia said the decision "eliminates a form of discrimination between players at the same squad that we have been fighting against for some time".

Defending champions Lazio, who have the maximum five non-EU players in their squad, hailed the court ruling as a victory in a wider battle against racism and intolerance among fans.

Lazio have been plagued by racism on their terraces in recent seasons and have been banned

from Rome's Olympic Stadium for their next home match after fans held up a banner targeting "blacks" and "Jews" during the Rome derby last Sunday.

"Once again football has been in the forefront in breaking down nationalistic and racial barriers," Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti said in welcoming the ruling.

However, some clubs criticised the timing of the court decision -- six weeks before the end of the season.

The Serie A championship is reaching a climax and many said the court should have waited until the close season before tinkering with the rules.

Juventus and AS Roma, who face each other in Turin on Sunday in the biggest match of the season, now have extra options at their disposal.

Roma, who lead Serie A by six points, have five non-EU players on their books to Juve's four.

The court ruling could also have a bearing on the various inquiries into false passports, which were used to evade the limit on non-EU players, in Italian soccer.

Lazio, Udinese, Inter Milan, Vicenza, AC Milan and Sampdoria -- the six clubs whose appeals prompted the FIGC decision -- are all involved in one way or another with the probes.

Thuram out of MU's reach?

AFP, London

Premiership champions Manchester United have been told they will have to pay Italian outfit Parma 24 million pounds to bring Lilian Thuram to Old Trafford, according to media reports here Saturday.

Sir Alex Ferguson has reportedly been interested in the French 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 winning defender for some time.

However, if Parma part with their prized asset, it could cost United a British record - 5 million pounds (7 million dollars) more than the 19 million pounds (27 million dollars) they laid out for PSV Eindhoven's Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Thuram told the Daily Star that a poor season on the pitch had helped make up his mind to move away from the Ennio Tardini stadium in the summer.

"This team has been built to win the title and again we failed," said Thuram. "I'll have to move. My mind is very clear as to where I will go, but I'll keep that to myself."

Argentines vote to strike

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina's professional footballers have agreed to press ahead with planned strike action this weekend.

The general secretary of Argentina's footballers' association (FAA) Sergio Marchi said the strike would go ahead after a meeting of around 100 players on Friday.

The body is demanding the Argentina football federation (AFA) agrees to honour players' contracts and take care of clubs' combined debts of around 55 million dollars.

The strike only concerns national competitions but the FAA have said if no agreement is reached by May 16, Boca Juniors, River Plate and Rosario Central may not play in the Libertadores Cup, South America's equivalent of the European Champions League.

The action concerns the top three divisions of the national championship.

Kluivert can't forgive himself

REUTERS, London

Barcelona striker Patrick Kluivert said on Friday he had not slept for days after his handball gifted Liverpool a place in the UEFA Cup final.

Kluivert handled the ball just before halftime in the second leg of the UEFA Cup semifinal on April 19.

Gary McAllister slotted the subsequent penalty for the only goal of the two legs.

"It was very difficult for me personally," Kluivert told icons.com. "I couldn't sleep that night or for days after."

"There was a corner to Liverpool and normally in this situation (Sami Hyypia would be with me. I was going for the ball and I expected him to be there."

"My hand came up as a sort of reflex against that when I was in the air and then I couldn't get my hand back down in time."

WC qualifier Morocco beat Algeria

REUTERS, Algiers

Morocco boosted their chances of reaching the World Cup finals for the fifth time with a 2-1 away win against Algeria on Friday in an African zone qualifier.

Morocco maintained their unbeaten record and now head group C with 12 points from six matches, three points ahead of Senegal who meet Egypt on Sunday in Cairo.

Algeria are languishing in fourth position on four points.

The Algerians were the first to threaten a goal when Rafik Essaifi hit the bar with a header in the third minute.

Blatter in Jordan

AFP, Amman

FIFA president Sepp Blatter flew into Jordan Saturday at the start of a three-nation development program tour which will also take him to Egypt and Sri Lanka.

Blatter will inaugurate later in the day the new headquarters of the Jordanian Football Federation along with federation president Prince Ali bin Hussein, half-brother of King Abdullah II.

The building is part of the GOAL programme to develop football in countries where the game is still at an amateur level and cost one million dollars, part of which was contributed by FIFA.

"This programme is part of several steps that we are taking in order to turn Jordan into a professional team and is bound to help us meet this challenge," Prince Ali told AFP ahead of receiving Blatter.

French First Division Troyes tame Lens

Football

REUTERS, Paris

Lens were denied their first home league win of the year on Friday, when they were held to a 1-1 draw by Troyes in the French First Division.

Lens, winless at the Felix Bollaert stadium since beating Olympique Marseille 1-0 in December, took a 10th minute lead with a header from defender Franck Queudrue.

But Troyes, who are chasing an Intertoto Cup berth, levelled in the 71st minute when striker Samuel Boutil slotted home from a corner.

Lens are now 14th in the table on 39 points while Troyes, are seventh on 44, trailing fourth placed Lille by seven points.

The match had been postponed last month as a security measure. The French army were removing World War One munitions from a camp at nearby Vimy and police said they did not have enough officers to control an expected 40,000 crowd at the match and help with the transport of the arms stockpile.



PHOTO: AFP

Lens' Antoine Sibierki (R) and Troyes defender David Hamed fight for possession during their French First Division match on May 4.

Beleaguered Bonfrere

Football

REUTERS, Port-Harcourt

The Nigerian government is to investigate the contract of sacked national coach Jo Bonfrere, officials said on Friday.

Dutchman Bonfrere was fired last month after a string of poor results in the 2002 World Cup qualifying campaign, which culminated in a shock 1-0 defeat by Sierra Leone.

Nigerian Football Association (NFA) vice-chairman Nwabufor Obieniu quoted Sports Minister Ishaya Mark Aku as saying he planned to set up a panel to exam-

ine the terms of Bonfrere's contract.

"I'm going to institute a probe into the contractual agreement that Bonfrere had as Nigeria's coach and get down to the root of his problems with the NFA," Obieniu quoted Aku as saying.

The defeat by Sierra Leone seriously jeopardised the chances of Nigeria, who play surprise group leaders Liberia on Saturday in the southern city of Port-Harcourt, reaching their third consecutive World Cup.

"Every Nigerian is worried about the downturn of our football and let me say that something will be done to tackle the situation," Obieniu quoted Aku as saying.

The terms of Bonfrere's contract

had been a cause of disagreement between him and the NFA, with the ruling body saying the Dutchman had too much power.

"The coach was given too much power in his contract. He only determines which players will be invited for a match, the training sites and assistants that will work with him," NFA

chairman Dominic Oneya said during one of a number of rows with Bonfrere.

Bonfrere, who guided Nigeria's Under-23 team to the 1996 Olympic title, was earning 30,000 dollars a month when he was appointed in December by former Sports Minister Damishi Sango for a second spell in charge.

Brazil in chaos

Football

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil's beleaguered national team, struggling to qualify for next year's World Cup after a series of poor results, are struggling to piece together a squad for next month's Confederations Cup.

Brazilian officials do not want to call up any of the country's foreign-based players for the tournament in Japan after a long season in Europe.

Nor do they want to upset local clubs by depriving them of players at a time when local championships are entering their decisive stages.

Brazil's national team co-ordinator Antonio Lopes said the only decision taken so far was that the team would travel on May 20 for the tournament, which begins 11 days later.

Officials have not even chosen a date for the squad to be named, he said.

Brazil's overcrowded domestic season, which involves leading clubs playing up to seven competitions and 90 matches a year, is being blamed for the once great national team's latest crisis.

The finals of the Carioca, Paulista and Mineiro championships, three of the most important tournaments in Brazil's bewildering soccer year, are due to be held between May 20 and the end of the month.

The Carioca final is almost certain to be between Vasco da Gama and Flamengo, who between them provided five players for the squad last month when Brazil played Peru. Corinthians, favourites to reach the Paulista final, supplied three more.

All Lopes could promise this week was more meetings.

"We will have more meetings and

then (coach) Emerson Leao will try and pick and squad. He has the final word.

"The problem of the schedules has been talked about a lot and there's no point in saying any more," said Lopes. "We have to look for alternatives," he said.

Leao has already said he is uneasy of depriving the clubs of their best players at one of the most important points in their season.

Brazil are at one of the lowest ebbs in their footballing history. They have slumped to fourth place in the South American

World Cup qualifying group from which only four teams qualify, while the fifth plays off against the Oceania zone winners.

They have lost away to Chile, Paraguay and Ecuador and been held at home by Peru, teams they would have brushed aside in their heyday.

Keep on going boys

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier has called on his side to continue their outstanding recent form and qualify for next season's Champions League.

Houllier has guided the club to three Cup finals and, after winning the Worthington Cup in March, Liverpool are now targeting the FA and UEFA Cups.

To claim all three trophies in one season would be a huge success for Houllier, who until this year had failed to win a major prize since joining the club in July 1998.

If Liverpool win their remaining league matches against Newcastle,

Chelsea and Charlton, they will finish at least third and will qualify for the Champions League, something Houllier regards as an even bigger achievement.

"Our objective at the start of the season was to reach the Champions League and it remains our objective now," he told the club's official website.

"But I am sure that if people had been told that with three Premiership games left we would be in third place and in three Cup finals they would have accepted that."

"Obviously we couldn't legislate for the number of matches we would have to play. We have taken all the cup competitions seriously and we are naturally aiming to win the remaining two."

"I still think it would be a great achievement if we finished the

season in the top three. It's up to us now."

To achieve his goal Houllier knows what his players must do.

"The players must repeat everything that they have done since the second leg against Barcelona. That means concentrating on one game at a time."

"It means being strong, both mentally and physically and being prepared in every way. Attention to detail is important. All these games are a test of a player's character and over the last few matches the players have responded really well."

"Our destiny is in our own hands. Getting into third place depends entirely on what we do. We know that if we win our last three league games we will be there."



PHOTO: AFP

Dortmund's Lars Richen falls to the ground after being tackled by Stuttgart's Zvonimir Soldo in their Bundesliga encounter on May 4.