

Pele supports Socrates

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian football legend Pele on Friday backed the nomination of former international midfielder 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 Ricardo Teixeira.

Socrates, who is a doctor and studied at the College of Surgeons in Dublin, starred 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 as well.

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 him for 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 they (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).

FA chief feels guilty

Football

REUTERS, London

Football Association chief Adam Crozier has admitted that the FA deserved some of the flak it received last week over the Wembley stadium project.

But the association's chief executive also sought to set the record straight on several aspects of the planned redevelopment, which is now in jeopardy over a lack of funding.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair said last week the FA had failed to bridge a funding gap – estimated at 100 million to 150 million pounds – from city backers and could not now proceed with the project.

Writing in Saturday's edition of The Times, Crozier said: "Those of us responsible for the

Wembley project have deserved some of the criticism that has come our way this week, but let us put things into some perspective.

"Wembley Stadium is not the Millennium Dome Mark II... We have done the professional and responsible thing by stopping and admitting that we have a problem before work has begun..."

He added: "The stark alternative was to risk bankrupting a not-for-profit organisation that has been in existence for more than 100 years."

He also countered some of the objections raised about the search for a new national stadium, whose estimated cost has soared from 240 million pounds to 660 million pounds and whose redevelopment has fallen at least two years behind schedule.

"It seems impossible for people to believe that football cannot afford to build its own stadium because of the riches in the game, but they need to understand that the FA is not the premier league."

He added: "That body is made up of clubs,

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 limit 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 out-dated."

AC Milan director general Ariedo Braga 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.

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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 Argentine football federation (FA) 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.

"England played the last game at Wembley eight months ago, and we're still no nearer starting the building of the new stadium. That seems like dreadful planning to me."

Southgate is quoted as saying on his official website.

"It's indicative of the way things are done in this country. There seems to be a lot of hassle over who is going to fund the stadium and where it's going to be, but you would have thought all these things would have been sorted out months ago, before Wembley was closed."

With government support not forthcoming, the FA will consider whether to scrap the plans to build a new national stadium at Wembley altogether, or move to an alternative site.

But Southgate, 30, who has played at Wembley for England and Aston Villa, said he is shocked by the way the national stadium's future has been jeopardised.

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."

"We could have played more of our World Cup qualifying games there, and this month's FA Cup final could have been played there as well," he said.

"I'm still amazed by the latest twist in the national stadium fiasco. It seems now that we won't have a new stadium for the foreseeable future, if at all."

As well as accepting that all parties involved should be blamed for what has happened.

Crozier feels that it is time to move forward in a constructive manner.

"We all have to share the blame,

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.

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

PHOTO: AFP

Beleaguered Bonfrere

Football

REUTERS, Port-Harcourt

The Nigerian government is to investigate the Argentine football federation (FAA) agrees to honour players' contracts and take care of clubs' combined debts of around 55 million dollars.

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