

Ronaldo wants an end to it

Football

REUTERS/AFP, Rome

Inter Milan forward Ronaldo has pleaded for an end to speculation surrounding his abject performance in the 1998 World Cup final in Paris.

Brazilian newspaper Lance claimed last week that Ronaldo had eight injections of the pain-killer xyllocaine during the 1998 tournament, causing a fit before the final against hosts France which Brazil lost 3-0.

"I had decided that I would never speak about the topic again, as I didn't want to add more fuel to all the lies and rumours that have been said about it," Ronaldo said on his official website.

"But, out of respect to all my fans, I want to point out, hopefully for the last time, that some statements are totally false and offend not only myself, but also the (Brazil) national team's medical staff.

"It is time to close this chapter of the past and think only about the future. That is on the pitch," added Ronaldo, who is hoping to become fit enough again to be picked in Brazil's squad for this year's World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea.

According to Lance's report, Ronaldo had received the injections to alleviate pain in his right knee during the 1998 World Cup tournament.

The injections accidentally ended up in Ronaldo's bloodstream, raising his heart rate and sending him into convulsions, the paper said.

Brazil sponsors Nike were also accused of putting pressure on the

striker to play, although Ronaldo denied those claims last October. Ronaldo is currently stepping up

his recovery from a thigh strain which has kept him away from the pitch for a month.



RONALDO

Inter Milan are second in Serie A, one point behind leaders AS Roma. Meanwhile, away at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's team doctor at the 1998 World Cup, Lidio Toledo, has denied accusations he gave Ronaldo a painkilling injection before the final.

But sports journal 'Lance', which carried the initial report last weekend through a "confidential" source, quoted Toledo as saying that the allegation was unfounded.

"No way. This doesn't exist. Ronaldo never had a painkilling injection - either at club or national team level," said Toledo.

"If he had undergone this treatment with his clubs he would have had to tell the national team doctor," said Toledo, who is now no longer assigned to the four-times world champions.

But 'Lance' maintains that Ronaldo had no less than eight injections during the tournament and the last one had side-effects which involved some form of a fit.

Lance had earlier reported: "The secret, which had been kept for four years, has been revealed by someone who heard the story from the player himself, and, for reasons which are not important, had no option but to tell all."

The player had kept the events to himself, the journal added, to protect Toledo.

Ronaldo played the full 90 minutes after Brazilian football federation official Ricardo Teixeira, concerned at the implications for the team's sponsors, allegedly insisted the 1996 and 1997 FIFA World Player of the Year start the match.

Edmundo had initially been picked to play alongside Bebeto in the final.

Real Madrid love Barcelona!

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have taken the unlikely step of choosing the city of Barcelona as the venue for their first football academy outside the Spanish capital.

The home of arch-rivals Barcelona was chosen as the base for the project because of the high level of support enjoyed by Real Madrid in the region, former Real striker Emilio Butragueno said at the inauguration of the academy.

"It is an honour for someone from Real Madrid to come to Barcelona to inaugurate a football academy," Butragueno was quoted as saying by sports daily Marca.

"The development of such academies is important for the club and it is particularly important in Catalunya because of the number of supporters we have here."

Vieira in Spain?

AFP, Madrid

Arsenal's French international Patrick Vieira met representatives of Real Madrid in the Spanish capital on Tuesday to discuss a possible transfer, a source close to the club said.

Vieira, who has been persistently linked to Real in the past two years, took advantage of a rest day from Arsenal duties to travel to Madrid for talks about a possible deal later this year, the source told AFP.

The Senegal-born star - regarded as one of the world's best midfielders - said last month he would decide on his future before taking part in the World Cup.

Blatter to be challenged

Football

AFP, Paris

The bitter battle over the future of the FIFA presidency threatens to plunge football's governing world body into the worst political crisis in its history.

Less than a week after current president Sepp Blatter put himself forward for another four years, powerful opponents are seeking to prevent the 65-year-old from winning a second term, FIFA sources told AFP.

An alliance joining senior figures from Europe, Africa and Asia are all involved.

At the heart of the dispute is the state of FIFA's finances.

Blatter, who replaced Brazil's Joao Havelange as president in an acrimonious election four years ago, insists that all is fine despite the dramatic collapse of ISL, FIFA's marketing partner, and the need for FIFA to take out a 420 million dollar bond from Credit Swiss First Boston.

The latest figure from Swiss courts put ISL's losses at a staggering 1.25 billion dollars.

Blatter put the cost to FIFA of the collapse at around 30 million dollars but independent marketing experts have suggested an extra zero could be added to that figure.

A large number of FIFA's executive committee believe the organisation may be heading for financial disaster and have called for a full audit of the books. So far Blatter shows no sign of agreeing.

A financial crisis could put at risk the 250,000 dollars a year paid to all of FIFA's 204 Associations. While the sum is small fry to giant associations such as Italy and Germany it is vital for many of the tiny associations.

The executive committee insist that Blatter must comply with their demands but Blatter argues that as he is executive president, elected by

official told AFP. "Zen-Ruffinen is supposed to be general-secretary but scores of dossiers are being kept from him. It is madness."

When Blatter rose from general-secretary to the top job in Paris in 1998 amid allegations of vote-buying, a charge strenuously denied by Blatter, he was hoping he could swing the executive committee behind him.

But the majority, led by UEFA president Lennart Johansson who lost to Blatter in Paris, have become more and more disillusioned by Blatter's autocratic rule.

Backing Johansson are fellow committee members Issa Hayatou, president of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), and South Korea's powerful FIFA vice-president Chung Mong-Joon.

Blatter has rejected all attempts by the executive committee to find out how much he earns as president. One published report puts his salary at 24 million dollars over six years.

Blatter says his salary is between him and FIFA's finance committee headed by Argentina's Julio Grondona but at least one senior figure in the committee has privately admitted he had no idea what the president earns.

The growing dispute could explode in the next two weeks according to one source.

"Certain moves are afoot that could bring it all to a climax," a senior international football administrator told AFP this week.

"Expect something to happen before the end of January,"



SEPP BLATTER

the Congress, his word is final and not the committees.

So nasty have relations between the two camps become that several committee members have been looking into the possibility of impeaching Blatter - a move unheard of in FIFA's history.

Even relations in FIFA headquarters in Zurich have become severely strained.

"There are now three camps - Blatter and his advisors, the group around general-secretary Michel Zen-Ruffinen and the marketing group. It is awful," one senior FIFA

Nations Cup could become WC qualifiers

Football

REUTERS, Bamako

A proposal to use the African Nations Cup finals as the qualifying competition for the World Cup is expected to be overwhelmingly endorsed by the Congress of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) on Thursday.

The plan to use the Nations Cup in place of preliminaries for the World Cup will be put to delegates at the Congress, meeting on the eve of this year's African Nations Cup starting in Mali on Saturday.

If the plan is approved the four semifinalists of the 2006 Nations Cup finals will qualify for the World Cup finals in Germany and the fifth African place will be decided by a formula put in place before each final by CAF's tournament organising committee.

CAF officials said there was no longer a place on the new unified international calendar for the World Cup and Nations Cup qualifiers to run parallel as they do every four years.

The Nations Cup is a biennial event - timing that CAF say they are not prepared to change because of the revenue it generates for the African soccer body.

The tournament held in the non-World Cup year would not be used for World Cup qualifying, only the one held in the same year as the World Cup. So the 2004 finals, due to be held in Tunisia would be unaffected by the change.

Cup solace for Thais

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand may have missed out on a berth in the World Cup finals, but the coveted trophy is making its way here instead as part of a promotional tour ahead of the tournament, organisers said Wednesday.

Sports-mad Thais will be able to see the golden trophy when football's world governing body, FIFA, brings it to Bangkok for the first time this weekend.

"The FIFA World Cup has huge significance for millions of football fans in Thailand" said Pornwut Sarasin, vice chairman of Thai Pure Drinks, the local bottler of sponsor Coca Cola.

"Bringing the 2002 trophy will inspire and motivate our young footballers."

The trophy will be displayed at the National Stadium where young Thai footballers will put on a "mini world cup" played by 32 five-a-side teams.

The world's best 32 teams will battle for top prize when the tournament begins in South Korea and Japan from May 31.

Press reports said FIFA has insured the 18-carat gold trophy for 23 million dollars. The sporting body keeps the trophy permanently and presents a duplicate to the champions after every World Cup.

The Thai national team has had a successful few years, taking fourth place at the Asian Games in Bangkok in 1998, their best result yet at the event, and then winning both the King's Cup and Tiger Cup in 2000.

To cap it off, Thailand for the first time stormed through to the final round of qualifiers for World Cup 2002, although they took last place in their group behind Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

FIFA world rankings

World champs stay ahead

Football

REUTERS, London

France have ushered in World Cup year by retaining their lead at the top of the latest FIFA world rankings.

The world champions, who will defend their crown at the finals in South Korea and Japan, have an 11-point advantage over second-placed Argentina in the world governing body's standings.

Brazil stay third and Portugal maintained fourth position after a month of inactivity for the top teams left the first 30 positions unchanged.

Three-times world champions Italy and Germany are sixth and 12th respectively, while England, who face Argentina in group F of the World Cup finals, are 10th.

Hosts South Korea are 42nd and Japan stay 35th.

China, who have qualified for their first ever finals, fall a place to 55th in the list.

Poland, in group D of the finals, moved up two places to 31st.

The World Cup finals begin on May 31.

FIFA TOP 20

1. France	812 pts
2. Argentina	801
3. Brazil	793
4. Portugal	741
5. Colombia	739
6. Italy	734
7. Spain	730
8. Netherlands	722
9. Mexico	714
10. England	712
11. Yugoslavia	710
12. Germany	707
13. Paraguay	691
14. Czech Republic	689
15. Romania	686
16. Sweden	676
17. Denmark	672
18. Ireland	672
19. Croatia	668
20. Belgium	666

ROK kicks off safety drive

2002 FIFA WORLD CUP KOREA JAPAN

AFP, Seoul

South Korean police have launched Operation Safe World Cup with round the clock patrols around stadiums and other facilities linked to the football extravaganza.

"The World Cup finals are five months away, but we are already in action to guard against any possible terrorist attacks which could happen anytime," said Choi Hyun-Chol, the head of World Cup security at the National Police Agency (NPA).

South Korea is co-hosting the World Cup with Japan and both countries have ordered elaborate security to guard against terrorism - following the September 11 attacks in the United States - and hooliganism.

The authorities even announced an amnesty for illegal weapons on Wednesday, warning of harsh punishment for anyone caught with illegal arms after it ends.

Choi said Operation Safe World Cup started late Tuesday and will intensify in the months up to the

tournament which runs from May 31 until June 30.

A 120-strong police team will patrol South Korea's 10 World Cup stadiums 24 hours a day. The stadiums were all purpose built for the World Cup at the cost of more than two billion dollars.

South Korea has already decided to impose no-fly zones around the stadiums to counter the terrorist threat.

From Tuesday, 6,700 police were mobilized to patrol World Cup facilities or reinforce existing forces at airports, ports and foreign missions, the NPA said. The number of police on World Cup security duty will eventually rise to 35,000.

Extra checks have also begun at possible terrorist targets such as subway stations, bus terminals and shops which trade in rifles and gunpowder.

South Korea has vowed tight security for the World Cup, offering armed bodyguards to most players and key figures in football's international governing body, FIFA.

Police said Wednesday that the public could hand in unregistered weapons and explosives during the month of February without fear of punishment.

Football

AFP, London

Fabrizio Ravanelli has squashed speculation that he is about to be catapulted into the vacant manager's post at Derby, saying he has no interest in taking over at Pride Park.

Derby had been expected to turn to the Italian striker for help following the sacking of Colin Todd after just three months in charge on Monday.

But Ravanelli has ruled himself out of the reckoning.

"I had already made up my mind that even if I had been asked to become caretaker player-manager, I would politely refuse," Ravanelli told Tuesday's Daily Mail.

Derby are instead expected to give reserve-team manager Billy McEwan a chance to stake a claim

for the manager's job while they mull over a long-term replacement.

McEwan has been chosen to oversee the side for Saturday's



FABRIZIO RAVANELLI

vital home clash with fellow relegation strugglers Ipswich.

Victory for Derby and McEwan,

who has been with the club for the last nine years, could put the former Sheffield United, Rotherham and Darlington boss in pole position.

The club confirmed: "The board has already received a substantial number of applications in the past 24 hours and will be working to make the right choice for the club and its supporters."

One man who will be relieved that Ravanelli will not be in charge is former Derby boss Brian Clough, the man who guided the Ram in their 1970s heyday.

He said: "The whole idea bordered on the ridiculous. It would have been barmy to give the job to a man without an ounce of managerial experience in his whole life."

"They would be better off giving the job to my son Nigel (manager of non-League Burton Albion). He's only 34 and barely out of his managerial nappies, but he makes Ravanelli look like an amateur."