

# Test of calibre for English elite

## Football

AFP, Paris

Manchester United and Liverpool face their toughest Euro tests of the season Wednesday as a place in the last eight of the Champions League looms for the continent's best.

Liverpool lead their northern rivals 4-2 in terms of European Cup triumphs but the Merseysiders have struggled in the second phase and are winless in four starts as they head for Barcelona, having already lost to the Catalan Club at Anfield.

Whereas United's hopes will be bolstered by the presence of Ruud Van Nistelrooy, who has scored in his last five Champions League outings, Liverpool will be without razor-sharp striker Michael Owen, who has hamstring trouble, and also the ineligible Nicolas Anelka.

Both sides' groups have proved tight affairs but United will progress from Group A if they can beat old foes Bayern Munich, their final victims in 1999.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side have put behind them their mid-season inconsistency to motor back to the top of the Premiership with Arsenal and Liverpool snapping at their heels.

But now is the time to shine in Europe - although even if the match at Old Trafford is a draw both United and Bayern would still be almost certain to go through as they currently have a four-point lead over Portuguese side Boavista.

If Boavista fail to win at Nantes, England's and Germany's finest will take their places in the quarter-finals.

United, who stunned Bayern with two goals at the death in the 1999 final, drew 1-1 at the Olympic Stadium earlier in the campaign but Bayern won both quarter-final legs last season.

United striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer paid the Bavarians tribute and warned against a repeat.

"They are organised, disciplined and they have got good individual players up front who can create chances from almost nothing."

"That is what happened last year," noted the Norwegian.

Bayern have blown hot and cold domestically but Saturday's success over city rivals 1860 Munich kept them in touch with leaders

Bayer Leverkusen, the gap three points.

Keeper Oliver Kahn is looking forward to the tussle, but still thinks a record fourth straight domestic title is equally important.

"It's one of the biggest European clashes there is and the whole of Europe will be watching - but our real final is Saturday's match against Kaiserslautern. If we win that one I'm convinced we'll win the league championship."



RIVALDO

**FIXTURES**

**Group A**  
Nantes (Fra) v Boavista (Por)  
Manchester United (Eng) v Bayern Munich (Ger)

**Group B**  
Barcelona (Spa) v Liverpool (Eng)  
Roma (Ita) v Galatasaray (Tur)

Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld is to ring the changes after the 1860 match as he expects to get suspended defenders Samuel Kuffour and Bixente Lizarazu back as well as midfield dynamo Stefan Effenberg.

"I'll make four or five changes," Hitzfeld told reporters, though he will be missing the injured Mehmet Scholl and strikers Hasan Salihamdzic and Carsten Jancker.

Paulo Sergio, on target on Saturday, is set to start.

Liverpool, who welcomed back coach Gerard Houllier back for a training stint at the weekend following his heart surgery last October, will be without their mentor in the Nou Camp.

But acting coach Phil Thompson said his reappearance had been a huge boost to the squad.

"Gerard's been putting in a few

hours in his office. But to see him out on the training pitch was brilliant - it shows how near he is to making a complete recovery," Thompson said.

The unavailability of Owen and Anelka means former Barca misfit Jari Litmanen is likely to partner Emile Heskey in attack.

Dynamic midfielder Steven Gerrard gave Liverpool a boost Monday as the is ready to return after four games out with a groin strain.

Gerrard has not played since pulling up injured during Liverpool's goalless draw with Galatasaray at Anfield three weeks ago.

Liverpool, bottom of the group with three draws and the Barca defeat, will be unable to settle for the 0-0 draw they managed in last season's UEFA Cup semi-final, when Barca labelled them ultra-defensive and boring.

And the Catalan club are ready - despite losing at Real Betis on Saturday, their ninth league loss of an inconsistent season.

With a potentially trip to Galatasaray to come Barcelona cannot afford to take a cautious approach Wednesday.

"To secure qualification for the quarter-finals we have to beat Liverpool," says Argentine international striker Javier Saviola.

"It would not be a good idea to go to Turkey next week and have to try and get three points from Galatasaray," he conceded.

Saviola hopes to partner Brazilian striker Rivaldo in attack but the Samba star is doubtful with a knee injury.

In-form Dutch international striker Patrick Kluijvert, who played a starring role at Anfield in their 3-1 win in November, has a high strain and faces a fitness test.

Group leaders Roma, who have six points to Barca's five, host Galatasaray with Vincenzo Montella eager to show that his weekend four-goal haul against Lazio was not a one-off.

Victory for Roma would see them through to the last eight regardless of the result of the Liverpool-Barcelona encounter.

Roma coach Fabio Capello is meanwhile staying silent on rumours that he will join Barcelona in the summer.

"Nothing is excluded," said Capello, a former Real Madrid coach.

# Houllier back on field

AFP, London

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier returned to the training pitch Monday as his team prepared for Wednesday's Champions League match at Barcelona.

Frenchman Houllier has been away from Liverpool's Melwood training complex since undergoing major heart surgery last October.

He gave the players a pre-match pep talk ahead of Liverpool's 3-0 Premiership win over Newcastle last Wednesday but Monday's session marked his real coaching comeback.

Houllier hopes to make a complete, full-time return this month but will not travel with the squad to the Nou Camp this week.

Assistant manager Phil Thompson told the club's official website, www.liverpoolfc.tv: "He had his bench coat on and he was loving every minute of it out there."

"The players were delighted to see him back on the training pitch, and I know he was delighted to be with us."

# Ronaldo says little

## Football

AFP, Appiano Gentile, Italy

Inter Milan's Brazilian striker Ronaldo walked out of a press conference after just two minutes here Tuesday the day after he had returned to Italy from Rio de Janeiro where he has been recovering from injury.

The 25-year-old told journalists he was unimpressed by reports he had read in Brazil and that would not be cooperating with Italian journalists for the time being.

The conference at Inter Milan's Pinetina training camp had been given much publicity and attracted numerous journalists but Ronaldo was short and to the point.

"I am fine," said the two-times former FIFA World Player of the Year. "I am delighted to be back but today I will speak very little because I have been following what has been said about me from Brazil and someone has been behaving very badly."

"Today I will speak very little - only to say hello. I spoke with (Inter



RONALDO

coach Hector) Cuper, I am happy to be back at work here at the Pinetina but today I don't want to talk."

"There will be other occasions to clarify what happened and - for now therefore - no interviews."

Last month when Ronaldo was given permission by Inter to remain in Rio to recuperate - reportedly against the wishes of Cuper - the Italian press pictured the Brazilian partying at the Rio carnival with sarcastic headlines such as "Ronaldo at work".

# Montella is bad news!

## Football

AFP, Milan

Vincenzo Montella's four goals in AS Roma's 5-1 city derby win over Lazio Sunday has rekindled optimism among the club's fans that the 'giallorossi' can successfully defend their title.

Montella's four-goal romp, including a first-half hat-trick, ensured Roma share pole position with Inter Milan with third-placed Juventus still a point adrift in third with just eight games remaining for all three sides.

Montella was modest, saying: "It is down to perseverance, I do not want to say everything I feel out of respect to Lazio. But this win was not down to me but the whole team."

But, Lazio fans apart, the one person in Rome who will have mixed feelings about Montella's virtuoso display is Roma's Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta whose future with the Italian champions could now be numbered.

Batistuta did not even attend Sunday's game. The official version is that he felt pain in his longstanding troublesome knee as he prepared to board the coach that would take Roma to the Olympic Stadium for Sunday's match and was given permission by coach Fabio Capello to return home.

But the fact that Batistuta had just learned that Capello was going to start the match with Montella up front at his expense has led some to

question that version of events.

After four goals from Montella - a feat never achieved in the history of the Rome derby - it will be hard for the 32-year-old Argentinian to get back in the side ahead of the Italian international who had been warned by Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni last week that his place in the World Cup squad was not assured.

It is the latest twist in a long rivalry between the players.

We Batistuta joined Roma from Fiorentina in the summer of 2000 he expected to be given the number



VINCENZO MONTELLA

nine jersey traditionally awarded to the star striker but Montella refused to hand it over.

In the en Batistuta had to settle for number 18. During last season Batistuta, dubbed 'il re leone' (Lion King) in Rome, justified his status as first-choice with 20 goals in Roma's

# CUP CORNER



AFP, Tokyo

A US-based Jewish rights group has demanded an apology from an English-language newspaper in Japan and the removal of an article highlighting a Nazi-themed bar in South Korea from its World Cup website.

Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, urged the newspaper to issue "an apology to its readers and to the victims of Nazism and take appropriate steps to discipline those involved in the writing and placement of this disgusting piece," according to a statement released Tuesday in Japan.

"I cannot believe it is the policy of the Japan Times to validate and market those who celebrate Nazism and/or denigrate the victims of history's greatest evil," Cooper said in a letter of protest to the Japan Times managing editor Yoshikazu Ishizuka which was quoted in the statement.

The offending article appears in the eating and drinking guide on the paper's 2002 World Cup Website introducing establishments in the Japanese and South Korean cities where 2002 World Cup soccer games will be held.

In the section on Busan, South Korea, the unsigned article describes the Rechts bar, complete with Nazi swastikas as "stylish" and "laid-back".

"Rechts is a cool basement bar with a very stylish interior, great mood lighting, artistic use of motifs and a pleasant laid-back atmosphere. So what's the problem? Er, only one: Rechts' motif is the Nazi swastika," it says.

"It's hard to dislike the place, but it's still uncomfortable being there. The barmaid was clad in black leather and even had Aryan blue contacts. You've got little Nazi signs on the toilet doors, some well-placed Nazi neon lights, some understated black motifs, a pretty, velvety Nazi menu holder and cute little Nazi napkins," it says.

"The staff insist that the owner uses the swastika from a design point of view, not a political one ("Gee Adolf, that's a stylish armband you've got there; why don't we take over the world?")," the story says with apparent sarcasm.

Ishizuka was not immediately available for comment Tuesday evening, a Japan Times official said.

The Wiesenthal Center said it had also urged Chung Mong-joon, chairman of the Korean World Cup organizing committee to do his utmost to have the bar closed or remodelled.

In using Nazi motifs, "the owner mocks millions of innocent people who were murdered by the Nazis and their allies, including Imperialist Japan, a fact that Korean people are quite familiar with," the center said.

## EAGLES CHANGE DEN

Lagos

Nigeria have picked a new World Cup training site in the Japanese city of Hiratsuka preferring it to their earlier choice of Fuji-Yoshida, officials told AFP Tuesday.

The secretary-general of the Nigeria Football Association (NFA) Taiwo Ogunjobi said Nigeria had received a good offer to train in the city with a population of 250,000.

"We have already visited the city and were warmly received. Our team are in for a good treat," Ogunjobi said.

Nigeria will put up at the Oiso Prince Hotel, about 15 minutes drive from their training grounds at Hiratsuka Municipal Park and Banjul.

He said the country will earn 350,000 dollars for staying at the seaside resort hotel.

Nigeria are grouped with Argentina, England and Sweden in a difficult first round World Cup draw.

The finals kick off on May 31.

## WORLD CUP BALLET

Tokyo

Yo-Yo Ma, one of the world's leading cellists, will stage a series of concerts in Tokyo and five other cities as a prelude to the World Cup finals to be co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, the tournament's Japanese organizers announced Tuesday.

Parisian-born Ma, 46, will team up with Russian pianist Vadim Sakharov and US ballet company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, for the tour.

It will kick off in Tokyo on the eve of the finals on May 30 for a three-day series of concerts, then move to Osaka on June 2, Oita on June 3, Shizuoka on June 5, Yokohama on June 6, and conclude in Niigata on June 7.

"I had the fortune to be vacationing with my family in France during the last tournament in 1998, so I have experienced firsthand the excitement this competition brings," Ma said in a statement.

Ma added that he was honoured to be a part of Asia's first World Cup. Tomaharu Tsuruda from the Japanese organizing committee said: "We wanted to stage the tour in 10 host cities in Japan, but we had to limit it to five because of Yo-Yo Ma's tight schedule."

The organizers said they also plan to invite football guests to a "Kabuki" (traditional Japanese popular theatre) performance and a reception on June 27.

They will also stage a "pre-final event" with appearances by former international football stars, fireworks and Japanese cultural performances on June 28 in Yokohama, the venue for the World Cup Final.

The organizers are considering several other events, including releasing some two million paper cranes folded by schoolchildren at the prize ceremony at Yokohama stadium, they said.

## RAID DRILLS IN KOREA

Seoul

Members of France's top anti-terrorism intervention squad on Tuesday staged exercises with South Korean forces preparing for the World Cup finals in June.

Members of the RAID rapid action police force are spending a week in Korea passing on their real life experience in handling hostage incidents and other potential security threats to the football tournament.

Experts from the two countries have been staging hostage release and firing exercises in various circumstances.

"Here they have very good training and good technique. But what we can bring is our experience in real events," said Eric Lacourt, the French embassy police attache for Korea and Japan.

"France has had experience with terrorism in Corsica and the Basque country and in other unfortunate instances in the past. The RAID was called out three times last week alone to handle instances where people were being held at gunpoint," he added.

The French force is the first from Europe to stage such exercises in South Korea.

Members from the huge South Korean force that will lead anti-terrorism measures during the World Cup, to be staged in Korea and Japan from May 31 to June 30, will go to France next month.

German security forces have also been cooperating with South Korea while Britain has been helping South Korean forces with anti-hooligan measures.

# Aldair, Roma parting

## Football

AFP, Rome

AS Roma president Franco Sensi Monday confirmed that the club's long-serving Brazilian defender Aldair would be leaving the club during the summer.

Sensi, speaking to Rete Sport channel, said that the 36-year-old veteran of Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning side would be leaving Roma after 12 years service.

"He's my friend, a great professional," said Sensi. "Now he only has two months left with us, he is an ex. I am sorry - these things happen."

Sensi then made a jibe at arch-rivals Lazio who were thrashed 5-1 by Roma in Sunday evening's city

derby, saying: "Roma makes judgments based on age and the budget because we must not end up like our neighbours. We will get someone better, younger who can run a bit more."

Aldair - full name Aldair Nascimento dos Santos - had already indicated he would like to return to Brazil although he has not ruled out continuing playing there, possibly with his first club Flamengo of Rio de Janeiro.

The man from the coffee-making town of Ilheus has had a glittering career as a footballer even though as a child he turned down the offered birthday present of a football, preferring a fishing rod because he felt it was the best way to feed his family.

He arrived at Roma in the summer of 1990 after a year with Benfica of Portugal.

# Hamman set for AFC hot seat

## Football

AFP, Nicosia

Mohammed bin Hammam, one of the men who found himself at the centre of the bribery scandal that has rocked football's world governing body FIFA, looks to have emerged unscathed and will become the new president of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

Hammam, who is already a member of the FIFA Executive Committee, was the only candidate for the post when nominations closed on March 10, AFC sources told AFP.

However, the 52-year-old Qatari will not take over from Malaysia's Sheikh Sultan Ahmad Shah, who has held the post since 1994, until the end of the World Cup finals in July allowing Sheikh Ahmad to still be in the hot-seat for the tournament in Japan and South Korea, the first to be held in Asia, the sources said.

"I will work with a view to uniting Asia and I hope that relations between the national federations and the AFC will improve and become firmer," bin Hammam said recently.

The Qatari is understood to have

had the backing of 38 of the 43 Asian federations, despite his name cropping up during the controversy which has dogged FIFA president Sepp Blatter who has been battling claims that he used bribes to bring him to power in 1998.

Bin Hammam was dragged into the affair - he was reported to have

"It is very unfortunate that I have been quoted in the Daily Mail published on February 28, 2002 in an article written by Andrew Jennings about two allegations of bribery and telling lies," said bin Hammam in a letter addressed to Blatter last week.

"As far as bribery allegation(s) (are) concerned I have written to CAF (African Football Confederation) president (Issa Hayatou) requesting him to establish an investigation committee as the allegation has been launched by (a) CAF member and directed against African National Associations and African personalities."

Bin Hammam is currently heading up FIFA's technical committee and is also on the financial committee of the game's world governing body.

In addition he is on the organising committee for the World Cup finals in June.

Bin Hammam began his rise through the game's organisational ranks as president of Rayyan Sports Club, Doha between 1972 and 1987 while he also held the presidency of the Qatari volleyball and table tennis associations from 1979 to 1983.

Between 1992 and 1996 he was president of the Qatar Football Association before moving to FIFA.



MOHAMMED BIN HAMMAM

been the "financing master" of Blatter's 1998 electoral campaign, who also organised trips to Paris, via the Gulf, for three Africans who allegedly supported Blatter in the vote.

But the Qatari denied the allegations.

# Toshack fired again

AFP, San Sebastian, Spain

John Toshack was sacked as boss of struggling Spanish First Division side Real Sociedad here Monday in the wake of the club's 2-0 defeat to Tenerife at the weekend.

Toshack, a favourite at Sociedad who had been serving his third spell as manager of the northern Spanish team, was dismissed with his entire coaching staff, the club said in a statement.

The experienced Welshman, who made his name as a player with Liverpool during their glory years in the 1970s, had been hired last year from French side St Etienne in an effort to turn around the club's fortunes.

But this season has been a tale of woe for Real, who are languishing second from bottom of the table and now face a fight to stay in the division after Sunday's latest reverse to Tenerife.

"We've only got nine matches left this season and we have to do something to turn things around," Real president Jose Luis Astiazaran explained here late Monday.

"The only thing that matters now is making sure we stay in the First Division. Hopefully this decision will freshen up the squad," Astiazaran added.

"We have taken this decision because results have not been good enough. Whenever we've played our direct rivals in our part of the table we've not done well," added Astiazaran. "On behalf of the club I would like to thank Mr Toshack for his professionalism and dedication."

# Totti's advice for Nesta

## Football

AFP, Rome

AS Roma skipper Francesco Totti has told Alessandro Nesta to get out of arch-rivals Lazio to save his career, the Italian sports press reported Tuesday.

Totti was speaking in the wake of Roma's 5-1 derby thrashing of Lazio - a game in which the normally rock-

Nesta bid. Totti had a different diagnosis, believing that Nesta was being damaged by being part of a club that is in steep decline.

"Obviously I am delighted with the win," Totti told Rete Sport radio. "But I was upset to see the disappointment of Alessandro Nesta because he is a friend. I hope he can go elsewhere because if the situation remains this way it will be difficult for him."

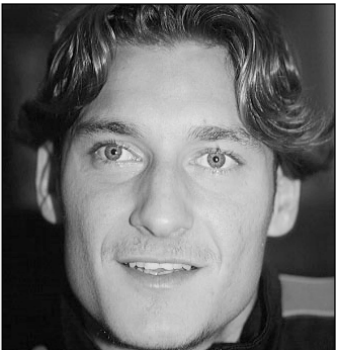
Nesta, barring injury a certain



ALESSANDRO NESTA

solid Italian international defender Nesta had by his own admission the worst game of his career.

Coach Alberto Zaccheroni replaced Nesta at half-time after the stopper had been responsible for all three of Vincenzo Montella's goals in the first period with the coach claiming that Nesta had been unsettled by the presence at the match of Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, reputedly preparing a



FRANCESCO TOTTI

member of Giovanni Trapattoni's starting line-up in the World Cup, is also reportedly under the scrutiny of Real Madrid.

The club skipper is an emblematic figure for Lazio fans as he came up through the youth ranks at the club and is a native Roman who hails from the Cinecittà area of the Italian capital where late film director Federico Fellini had his famous film studios.