

CUP CORNER

2002 FIFA WORLD CUP
KOREA JAPAN

AFP, London

England captain David Beckham and his pop star wife Victoria are to throw a 250,000-pound (356,000 dollar) Oriental-style party before the team fly to the World Cup in Japan, it was reported here on Saturday.

The party will take place in the Japanese Garden of the couple's mansion on May 12 just five days before England skipper Beckham leads his squad into their World Cup bid in the Far East, The Sun reported.

Invitations alone cost 10,000 pounds (14,235 dollars) and will be tied with a traditional oriental grass ribbon.

"We hope the England team have a good tournament. We hope you develop your mind for the battle and win you games."

The dress code is "white tie and diamonds", with Geisha girls on hand to welcome guests, the tabloid Sun reported.

Friends from the music world of Victoria Beckham, also known as Posh Spice, are expected to be invited including Elton John, Ronan Keating and the other three Spice girls.

England coach Sven Goran Eriksson is expected among the 400 guests along with Beckham's England team-mates David Seaman, Sol Campbell and Michael Owen.

The team will spend a fortnight acclimatising on an island off South Korea before their opening match against Sweden on June 2.

LOPEZ DREAM
SHATTERED

Barcelona

The World Cup dream of Barcelona's Spanish international Gerard Lopez crashed Friday when the midfielder suffered a ruptured right knee ligament in training.

The 23-year-old Lopez will be out of action for three months, the Catalan club's medical service confirmed, and will miss football's showcase in Japan and South Korea.

Lopez arrived at Barca at the beginning of the season from Primera Liga rival's Valencia but despite failing to find a regular spot on the first team has been called up several times for national duty by Spanish coach Jose Antonio Camacho.

ROMARIO PRETTY
CONFIDENT

ROMARIO

Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian veteran striker Romario said Friday he is confident of making the four-time world champions' squad for this summer's finals - despite not apparently having the ear of coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

In an interview with the Folha De Sao Paulo the 36-year-old marksman said he was undeterred by Scolari's comments earlier in the week indicating that he was unlikely to be called upon for the March 27 home friendly with Yugoslavia.

Asked what made him think he would still manage to make the squad the Vasco de Gama striker said simply: "What is football? It's about goals. What does the striker have to do? He has to score goals."

"And that's what I do," added the man whose five goals in the 1994 finals helped the auriverde to their record-breaking victory.

Romario said he would not be content to sit on the bench, however.

"If I come back I'll be looking to score," he vowed.

But he warned that he might ask for a different training regime if Scolari does pick him for the final squad.

"A 36-year-old player can't train like a 19-year-old," he noted.

In his absence Rivaldo, Ronaldinho Gaucho and - officially - Inter Milan's convalescent Ronaldo will be the strikers against the Yugoslavs.

Gazza now Burnley's

Football

REUTERS, Burnley

Former England international Paul Gascoigne has joined First Division Burnley from premier league stragglers Everton.

Burnley have taken over Gascoigne's Everton contract for the rest of the current season, their chairman Barry Kilby said on Saturday. No transfer fee was involved.

Gascoigne, 34, told new Everton manager David Moyes this week that he did not want to stay at the club following the sacking of Walter Smith on Wednesday.

"We will take it to the end of the season and then see what options are open for both of parties."

Gascoigne has said he may finish his career with a lucrative move to Asia or the United States at the end of the current campaign.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Inter Milan coach Hector Cuper (L), watches superstar Ronaldo in training at the club's Appiano Gentile base on March 15.

Inter to call the shots

Football

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti has warned Brazil that they will only be permitted to select star striker Ronaldo once he has made his comeback from injury with his Italian First Division club, Gazzetta dello Sport reported Saturday.

Earlier this week Brazil called Ronaldo into their party for the March 27 friendly with Yugoslavia in Fortaleza - a move which raised eyebrows as he had only just returned to Italy to recombine training with Inter after being laid off since before Christmas with injury.

Ronaldo will not play in Sunday's match with Lecce but it is thought that Inter coach Hector Cuper may be holding him back for

next week's crunch title match with AS Roma at the San Siro with the possibility of him having an outing as a substitute in the UEFA Cup against Valencia of Spain earlier in the week.

But if Argentinian Cuper does not pick him then the two-times FIFA World Player of the Year will not be made available for Brazil, said Moratti.

"Coach (Luiz Felipe) Scolari (of Brazil) simply can not rush Inter," explained Moratti. "Let's be clear about that. Only Cuper, after talking to the medical staff, can have the last word."

"To be honest we are not interested in what Brazil think. I don't think we can let him play for the national team before he plays for Inter. All that is needed is patience."

On Friday, Cuper watched Ronaldo at a half-hour fitness training for those that did not play

the UEFA Cup match against Valencia, which include Vieri, Cristiano Zanetti, Dalmat and Farinos. Ronaldo followed a specific workout, that included several speed exercises.

Tensions have frequently surfaced between Inter, Brazil and Ronaldo over how the 25-year-old should be handled. In February Inter reluctantly authorised the player to continue his rehabilitation in Rio de Janeiro rather than Italy - against the wishes of Cuper, who is a noted disciplinarian.

Pictures of the player partying at the Rio carnival did not help matters and at the time Moratti warned: "We don't need to make this into Ronaldo-gate. But to speak and be frank with each other. He is an Inter player and a Brazil player but first and foremost an Inter player."

'Batigol' in no doubt

2002 FIFA WORLD CUP
KOREA JAPAN

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina's record-breaking goalscorer Gabriel Batistuta is sure he will be picked for the World Cup even though he has been repeatedly overlooked by his country for the last year.

Batistuta, who has lost his place to rival Hernan Crespo since suffering a knee injury at the end of 2000, was again left out of the squad for this month's friendly against Cameroon.

"One always wants to play for the national team and despite not having been chosen for this game, I'm convinced I will be at the World Cup," Batistuta told Radio La Red from Italy.



GABRIEL BATISTUTA

publicly said so, commentators believe he thinks the pair are too similar to be fielded together.

Batistuta, who has scored 55 goals in 75 appearances, has only played once in the last year but marked the occasion with a goal, scoring the equaliser as Argentina drew 2-2 away to Paraguay in a World Cup qualifier.

He has had a frustrating injury-plagued season with Roma in Italy but said he has put his knee injury behind him.

"The knee's fine and that has

lifted my spirits," he said.

"I've got my head in the World Cup, but that does not affect me when I go onto the field (for Roma). If you go onto the field wondering what about might happen, that makes it worse."

Batistuta said he considered Argentina favourites to win a third world title.

"If we put all the cards on the table, Argentina have a great chance to be champions, and this is not something that I am inventing."

"The fact that Argentina are candidates does not put any more pressure on me."

Argentina face Nigeria, Sweden and old rivals England in the first round in the so-called group of death.

Batistuta said he expected to be punished by European soccer's governing body UEFA for his part in the brawl at the end of Wednesday's Champions League game at home to Turkish club Galatasaray.

He admitted he was involved in the scenes which ended with 13 police injured after they had attempted to separate fighting players.

"I let my nerves get the better of me," he said. "The worst of it is that everybody saw it, that's the saddest thing."

"I'm expecting a punishment because I reacted to the verbal attacks of the Turks in front of the television, but I don't believe I deserve what's coming for me."

Caniggia wants League Cup

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Veteran Argentinian striker Claudio Caniggia is determined to end his long wait for a medal by helping Rangers to victory in Sunday's League Cup final against First Division Ayr United at Hampden Park.

The last time the 35-year-old won anything was in 1991 when he was part of the Argentina side which won the Copa America.

The long-haired marksman may not have enjoyed the best of seasons since arriving at Ibrox from Dundee last summer, but still has a chance of making his country's World Cup squad this summer.

Caniggia, who made his name alongside Diego Maradona in the Argentina sides of the early 1990s,

earned an international recall for the international friendly against Wales in Cardiff.

But before that the former Boca Juniors man wants to taste victory once again by helping Rangers capture their first trophy in almost two years.

"We will do everything we can to win against Ayr on Sunday and it would be good for me to get a winner's medal," he told the club's official website.

"We have a chance to win a cup, and every trophy is important for us."

"Maybe we have lost a chance in the league now by drawing with Celtic (last week). It will now be very difficult to win the championship, although it is not mathematically impossible."

"But we have a chance to win this cup and then another one, the Scottish Cup, after that."

Hayatou challenges Blatter

Football

AFP, Paris

Issa Hayatou's decision to stand against current FIFA president Sepp Blatter in the May election in Seoul to decide who will rule world football for the next four years, promises a political battle that will be both bitter and acrimonious.

While Hayatou, president of the African Football Confederation (CAF) physically towers over Blatter, a former Swiss lawyer, he has a mountain to climb if he is to overthrow Blatter.

"I will strive for a new FIFA," declared the 55-year-old Hayatou after announcing his candidature on Saturday.

But the man from Cameroon has a battle on his hands against 66-year-old Blatter, a master of political FIFA infighting.

Four years ago Hayatou stood formally behind UEFA president Lennart Johansson when he fought Blatter to see who would replace outgoing FIFA president Joao Havelange.

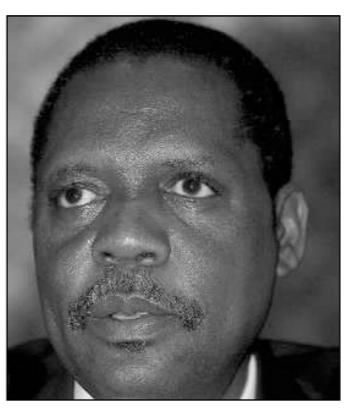
But when it came to deliver the African votes to the burly Swede, who was promising a new more open FIFA, Hayatou could only look on in horror as many of the African delegates swung behind Blatter, who had been Havelange's secretary general.

Even before the vote was counted in Paris on the eve of the 1998 World Cup there were allegations that the Africans had been

bought by Blatter supporters.

Those allegations resurfaced with a fanfare earlier this month when Hayatou's CAF vice-president Farah Addo told London's Daily Mail that he had turned down 100,000 dollars to vote for Blatter but he claimed he knew of 18 other African members who had taken money.

Hayatou has remained silent publicly about Addo's allegations but Blatter has made it clear that he sees this as an attempt to try and bring him down as the election, held



ISSA HAYATOU

on the eve of the 2002 World Cup, approaches.

The CAF president is also a key member of the FIFA executive committee group that has accused Blatter of taking FIFA towards the verge of bankruptcy.

Hayatou, along with Johansson and South Korea's powerful FIFA vice-president Chung Mong-Joon have been spearheading the

attempt to set up a special investigation into FIFA's finances.

They finally beat Blatter into submission last week in Zurich and now the six-man committee has until April 30 to reveal their findings and if FIFA's finances are announced to be in good shape Hayatou will suffer.

Johansson is now backing Hayatou in his presidential ambitions and Chung is also suspected to play a key role in the campaign but despite declarations from UEFA that they are backing Hayatou many European members have told AFP that they will vote for Blatter.

Many Asian votes are also expected to go with Blatter, as well as South America and even a number of African votes will go with the status quo.

"He is a wily politician who knows how to win. I cannot see how Hayatou can garner enough votes to beat him," he added.

Hayatou is banking on the backing of Johansson and Chung to help him get the majority of the 204 national association votes on offer.

Whatever the outcome, nobody doubts it risks being a short, sharp, bitter nasty election.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Emile Heskey, the Liverpool striker (R) celebrates his goal against Middlesbrough at the Riverside Stadium yesterday.

Fergie after Crespo?

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has launched a 35-million-pound (50 million dollar) bid to land Lazio's Argentinian striker Hernan Crespo, according to reports here Saturday.

Ferguson attended last week's Rome derby and agents acting on behalf of the English champions have informed Lazio that the Premiership leaders want to add the 26-year-old Crespo to their list,

media reports said.

The United boss wants another top striker following the departure of Andy Cole and the impending exit of Dwight Yorke.

If the deal goes through it would break the British transfer record of 28.1-million-pounds paid by Ferguson to Lazio last year for Juan Sebastian Veron.

The dissatisfied Crespo has already threatened to part company with the Italian First Division club at the end of the season unless the struggling Roman side put together a competitive team.

But he has previously indicated he would like to play in Spain, either

for Real Madrid or Barcelona.

"One day I would like to play in Spain, there are only two clubs (worth playing for) there," said the Argentine, who fetched a world record fee of 54 million dollars when he joined Lazio from Parma two years ago.

That mark was quickly surpassed when Portugal's Luis Figo switched from Barcelona to Real Madrid just days later.

Crespo was crowned the leading goal scorer in the Serie A last season with 26 goals in his first season with Lazio.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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