

Trap's Italy get to business

Baggio chapter closed



AFP, Coverciano, Italy

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni on Monday definitively closed the book on the Roberto Baggio debate as the 'Azzurri' began their preparation for the World Cup here at the National Technical Centre near Florence.

Trapattoni, giving his first major press conference since announcing his 23-man squad, got his retaliation in first as he made a statement before taking questions, saying that from Tuesday he would answer no more questions about the Brescia striker he omitted from the line-up.

"Today I hope to close the debate on Baggio," announced the 63-year-old coach. "I will take questions today but from tomorrow I will never speak about it again out of respect to the boys here today and also to him."

"We have pre-fixed an objective and that must occupy all our attention."

Inevitably most of the questions that followed were about Baggio.

"He did not have time to get back in condition again after his injury," said Trap who ignored a vast media campaign to pick the veteran of three World Cups. "I was thinking of him back in October and November."

"I feel for him but I also feel for (Massimo) Ambrosini, (Marco) Di Vaio and the Roma goalkeeper (Francesco Antonioli). I wanted to keep the group of players who helped us qualify together."

"A few years ago he was an emblematic figure - like Ronaldo for Brazil."

"It displeases me having to make decisions like that but it is the job of the coach."

Trapattoni admitted the world had changed since he sampled the pre-World Cup atmosphere as a player in 1962 although he never played in Chile after being injured in

a warm-up match with Belgium.

"That's such an intelligent question that I can't answer it in just a few words," he told AFP.

"There are technological changes and also that applies in football."

"It was a very long time ago. Now we have countries like France who have become world-beaters and Ecuador (competing in their first World Cup).

"You have to fear all the teams, there are no bad teams. There are different systems - 4-4-2, 3-4-1-2, 4-3-3. There are no surprises in football anymore."



GIOVANNI TRAPATTONI

"It's like comparing a contemporary poet to one 40 years ago. Why am I talking about poetry?"

Trapattoni would not make predictions about the World Cup. "There will be surprises. Nothing is certain," he said. "Everyone will be tough to beat and we have to respect each team."

Trapattoni, due to hold a closed training session later Monday, had earlier grouped his players together at 11:00am in the centre of the practice pitch.

Players from Juventus and Parma were absent, having been given an extra 24 hours to get to Coverciano after competing in Friday's Italian Cup Final. They should arrive Monday evening.

But 'Trap' admitted he did not much time to work with the players.

"We have very little time," said the coach. "Thank goodness there was not a play-off for the title otherwise we would only have got together 10 days before the start (of the World Cup)."

The morning session was a light one in the tranquil surroundings of the base with players jogging around the running track.

However, AS Roma skipper Francesco Totti - whom Trapattoni has identified as his key player - underwent physiotherapy on the injury that limited his participation in the closing stages of the Italian First Division season while his colleagues jogged.

Club rivalries were forgotten with AC Milan's Gennaro Gattuso and Inter Milan's Luigi Di Biagio laughing and joking together while Trapattoni himself seemed on good form, laughing and shaking hands with journalists.

The players have only four full days here before they travel to Prague Friday for Saturday's friendly with the Czech Republic.

On Tuesday May 21 they will hold a public training session at Rome's Stadio Flaminio before flying out to Japan where they will be bidding to equal Brazil's record of four World Cups.

A small group of fans outside the iron gates reserved a special cheer for Angelo Di Livio, the only Fiorentina player in the 23-man squad.

Trapattoni and his men were getting their first taste of World Cup fever with camera crews and journalists thronging the perimeter of the pitch and present in the lobbies.

World Cup heroes of the past were also present including Luigi 'Gigi' Riva, the striker who won the Scudetto with Cagliari in 1969-70 and featured in the Italy squad that finished runners-up to Pele's Brazil in Mexico.

Riva now works as a conduit between the players and the Italian Football Federation (FIGC).

Beckhams' steller party



AFP, London

Stars from the world of showbusiness and British football flocked to a pre-World Cup garden party Sunday hosted by Victoria and David Beckham.

The couple organised the lavish day for family and friends at their home in Hertfordshire, north of London.

Around 300 fans of the Beckhams, many wearing England shirts and Manchester United tops, who lined the entrance to the home to get a glimpse of the guests, were kept back by metal barriers and more than a dozen police.

Among the first to arrive was Geoff Hurst - hero of England's winning 1966 World Cup squad.

He was soon joined by some of

England's present international soccer players Teddy Sheringham, Joe Cole and Danny Mills.

Former England star turned television presenter Gary Lineker also attended, as did snooker player Jimmy White.

Singer Elton John, a close friend of Victoria, was also present along with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and British tennis player Greg Rusedski.

The coverage of the event, reported to have cost 350,000 pounds(dollars), was said to have been bought up by two glossy magazines and a television company and all proceeds were due to go to children's charity NSPCC.

A spokesman for the charity said: "We're very grateful the NSPCC will be given the profits from the party being held by David and Victoria as they are long-term supporters of the charity and their work in the past has been invaluable."

Prosinecki to quit after finals



REUTERS, Zagreb

Croatia's veteran playmaker Robert Prosinecki will retire from international football after the World Cup finals starting at the end of the month.

"It is time to start building a new team, so I plan to play my last international game in Japan or South Korea," the 33-year old former Real Madrid, Barcelona and Sevilla player told the Vecernji List newspaper on Monday.

"I hope Croatia will make a memorable result there, with which I would retire my old international shirt," Prosinecki told the daily shortly before coach Mirko Jozic's squad left for a week of training in the Austrian Alps.

"I've had a short break after an

exhausting season and when I raise my fitness in the next 20 days there will be no problems. I want to prepare in the best possible way so I can give my best (at the World Cup)," he said.

The inspirational midfielder, who quit English First Division side Portsmouth and is negotiating a contract in Japan, played for Yugoslavia in 1990 and for Croatia at the 1998 World Cup in France, where they ended a surprising third.

His team now faces Italy, Mexico and Ecuador in first-round group G and Prosinecki is convinced the opening game -- against Mexico on June 3 -- will be crucial.

"Opening games are always important, but I think this one is crucial for us, this is the one where we have to seek victory. But the most important thing is to stop living in the past. In France we were stronger," he said.

Mexico beat Colombia



AFP, Mexico

Mexico beat Colombia 2-1 in a World Cup warm-up at the Azteca stadium here on Sunday, just 19 days before the finals begin in Korea and Japan.

Mexico's goals came from

Spain, Portugal name squads

INTERNET

Portuguese and Spanish final 23 member squads for the FIFA World Cup 2002 announced yesterday:

PORTUGAL SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Nelson Pereira (Sporting Lisbon), Ricardo Pereira (Boavista Porto), Vitor Baia (FC Porto).

Defenders: Abel Xavier (Liverpool/England), Roberto Severo "Beto" (Sporting Lisbon), Marco Caneira (Benfica), Fernando Couto (Lazio/Ita), Nuno Frechaut (Boavista Porto), Jorge Andrade (FC Porto), Jorge Costa (Charlton/Eng), Rui Jorge Oliveira (Sporting Portugal).

Midfielders: Nuno Rocha "Capucho" (FC Porto), Luis Figo (Real Madrid/Spa), Paulo Bento (Sporting Portugal), Paulo Sousa (Espanyol/Spa), Pedro Barbosa (Sporting Lisbon), Armando Teixeira "Petit" (Boavista), Rui Costa(Milan/Ita), Sergio Conceicao (Inter Milan/Ita), Daniel Kenedy (Maritimo Funchal).

Forwards: Joao Pinto (Sporting Lisbon), Nuno Ribeiro "Gomes" (Fiorentina/Ita), Pedro Resendes "Pauleta" (Bordeaux/Fra).

SPAIN SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Santiago Canizares (Valencia), Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Ricardo Lopez (Valladolid).

Defenders: Curro Torres (Valencia), Fernando Hierro (Real Madrid), Miguel Angel Nadal (Real Mallorca), Carles Puyol (Barcelona), Juanfran Garcia (Celta Vigo), Enrique Romero (Deportivo La Coruna).

Midfielders: David Albelda (Valencia), Ruben Baraja (Valencia), Ivan Helguera (Real Madrid), Luis Enrique Martinez (Barcelona), Gaizka Mendietza (Lazio/Ita), Sergio Gonzalez (Deportivo La Coruna), Juan Carlos Valeron (Deportivo La Coruna), Xavi Hernandez (Barcelona).

Strikers: Francisco De Pedro (Real Sociedad), Alberto Luque (Real Mallorca), Fernando Morientes (Real Madrid), Raul Gonzalez (Real Madrid), Joaquin Sanchez (Real Betis), Diego Tristan (Deportivo La Coruna).

Hope Dyer's only comfort

May sue tackler



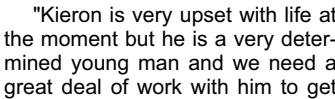
REUTERS, London

England midfielder Kieron Dyer is clinging on to the hope of playing in the World Cup despite injuring a knee over the weekend, his agent Jonathan Barnett has said.

The Newcastle player left Southampton on crutches after a red-carded challenge by Moroccan defender Taher El Khalej on Saturday and was widely written off for the World Cup by British newspapers.

But Barnett told Sky Sports on Monday that Dyer was undergoing intensive treatment, adding: "He said it's a little bit better than yesterday, he's going to have some intensive training and put his whole heart and soul into it, and if anybody can do it, he can."

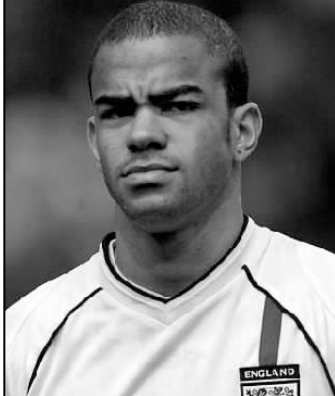
"Sven has given Kieron until the end of this week, and I'm sure Kieron will do his utmost to get to the World Cup but he won't if he's not 100 per cent certain he will be fit to play."



REUTERS, London

"Kieron is very upset with life at the moment but he is a very determined young man and we need a great deal of work with him to get him right."

"He was crying yesterday, he was devastated, it's everyone's



KIERON DYER

ambition to go to the World Cup."

Barnett told the Monday's Daily Express he and Dyer were considering suing El Khalej and Southampton over the incident.

"We have considered legal

action, certainly against the player and possibly his club," he told the paper.

"We would like to take some action, but we shall have to be advised by the lawyers on how to quantify the damage."

"There is no doubt a player of Kieron's standing would lose out on sponsorship endorsements that might not be realised for another four years."

"A successful World Cup might have inspired a big bid from a top European club."

Earlier, El Khalej apologised for his tackle on Dyer and said he had sent a letter to the player.

He told Sky Sports News: "I am sorry for him and that he's not going to the World Cup. I played in the World Cup in 1994 and 1998 so I know what he is feeling."

"All players like to play in the World Cup. I've sent him a letter because I'm sad for him, he is a good player and helped England to reach the World Cup."

He added: "I just want to take the ball but I got there too late and his knee stayed behind the ball and maybe the tackle was very strong."

England play their first World Cup finals match against Sweden on June 2.

USA edge Uruguay

REUTERS, Washington

An outstanding performance from Brad Friedel, the goalkeeper still fighting for his World Cup place, helped the United States hang on for a 2-1 victory in a friendly against Uruguay.

The Blackburn Rovers player, battling with Tottenham counterpart Kasey Keller to start in goal at the World Cup finals next month, produced a string of stunning saves to deny the South Americans in a frenetic finish.

The United States play Jamaica in a friendly on Thursday and surprise non-qualifiers Netherlands on May 19.

The home side started brightly Sunday with Tony Sannah heading them in front from a corner in the sixth minute.

Five minutes before halftime DaMarcus Beasley, the youngest member of the U.S. team, capitalized on some poor defending to put them 2-0 up.

He rounded one defender, and kept his feet to score at the second attempt after Uruguay keeper Gustavo Munua blocked his original shot.

Friedel saved two close-range shots from his left by Alvaro Recoba before the ball bounced quickly to his other side where striker Sebastian Abreu was on hand to slot home.

The Uruguay forward was denied a second goal 15 minutes from time, when the Guatemalan referee ruled him offside.

Bayer Neverkusen?



REUTERS, Berlin

An unprecedented treble was at stake for Bayer Leverkusen but now a historic failure is looming.

After missing out on two titles in just a week, the club have no other option than to upset Real Madrid in Wednesday's Champions League final in Glasgow if they are to avoid finishing the season empty-handed yet again.

"Neverkusen", one dejected fan called his unfortunate side on the club's website after they finished as Bundesliga runners-up for the fourth time in six years, this time to Borussia Dortmund, in a frantic finale.

A week later, on Saturday, they had another chance, this time challenging holders Schalke 04 in the German Cup final.

Commercial manager Reiner Calmund covered his face with his hands when veteran midfielder Andreas Moeller effectively killed the tie by making it 3-1 for Schalke.

"Oh no, not again" said the expression on Calmund's face before he buried it from view. Schalke went on to win 4-2.

Calmund had dreamed of seeing Leverkusen become the first German club to win the treble of domestic league and Cup titles as well as the European Cup in one season.

Instead they added weight to their reputation as the nearly men of German soccer and could now earn an unwanted line in the record books by moving within touching distance of three titles before return-

ing home with nothing at all.

Coach Klaus Toppmoeller, who has won praise for his side's brilliant run, tried his best to put on a brave face after Saturday's defeat.

"We have one chance left and we will give everything we have to take it," he said.

"If there is justice, we will win a title."

The problem for Toppmoeller is Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Raul and a handful of other top players are in the way.

Leverkusen have inspirational

earlier in the campaign.

Toppmoeller will be without suspended Brazilian midfielder Ze Roberto and captain Jens Nowotny, who is sidelined with a knee injury that has ruled him out of the World Cup.

Still, a burst of pride is possible and Leverkusen might emulate arch-rivals Bayern, who beat another Spanish club, Valencia, in last year's final in Milan.

Fans throughout soccer-mad Germany feel Leverkusen, who have not put their hands on any silverware since winning the German Cup for the first and only time in 1993, deserve a happy ending to their sad story.

"We have had a superb season and we have won sympathy like never before," said Calmund. "Maybe that's more important than winning a title."

Much will depend on which side Leverkusen field at Hampden Park, the giant killers who have made Europe take notice or the perpetual runners-up who always lose their nerve when it matters.

If the latter turn up, Leverkusen could share the fate of the last German team who faced Real in a European Cup final in Glasgow. It was Eintracht Frankfurt in 1960 and the Germans were humbled 7-3 in one of the finest matches ever played.

"Real had great men like Alfredo Di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas," remembered the 49-year-old Toppmoeller, who was a little boy already obsessed with football at the time.

"Zidane, Figo and Raul aren't bad either," he sighed.



KLAUS TOPPMOELLER

Germany midfielder Michael Ballack, who has made his big breakthrough this season, and elegant Brazilian defender Lucio, but they still look pale compared with the prestigious Madrid outfit.

"We realise that Real are a fantastic team with exceptional individuals but we have beaten good sides already," the Leverkusen coach said, referring to victories over Barcelona, Juventus, Liverpool and Manchester United

Velappan for truce



AFP, Seoul

A top soccer official on Monday called for a truce in FIFA's power struggle saying attention must now be devoted to the World Cup and winning back international trust.

Peter Velappan, general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation who has guided Korea and Japan through their World Cup preparations, also called on sponsors to keep faith with football, insisting the troubles could not kill the sport.

The growing battle between FIFA president Sepp Blatter and his opponents is expected to spill over at the World Cup as the election for the president is to be held at a congress in Seoul just before the tournament starts on May 31.

"My real appeal is that we should now call a truce or ceasefire," Velappan told a press conference in Seoul where he is inspecting final preparations as FIFA's main World Cup coordinator.

"There are only 18 days and Korea and Japan and the World Cup deserve the total attention of FIFA and the rest of the world. So just switch off everything and focus your attention on the World Cup."

Velappan said no country in the

past has invested as much as Korea and Japan in new stadiums, infrastructure and manpower.

"I strongly believe that Korea and Japan and the World Cup as an event, and football as the most beautiful game, must now get the attention of all those interested in the game," said Velappan, one of the most respected administrators in football.

He said the World Cup could only exist because of revenue from television and sponsors and warned that FIFA's problems "naturally is not very healthy."

"My only appeal to sponsors is that their investment in the game, in football, so they should maintain their faith and trust in the game."

ISL, FIFA's former marketing partners which collapsed last year, had estimated the World Cup to be an industry worth six billion dollars through television rights, souvenirs and other spinoffs.

And Velappan said: "The game will never die. The game survives all kinds of tribulations and problems, but organisations like the International Olympic Committee and FIFA have to go through changes in order to meet the future of our game."

He added that over the past year "the image of FIFA as the most powerful organisation of football has been very powerfully damaged by these very serious problems

Armas out of World Cup



AFP, Washington

Midfielder Chris Armas for a knee ligament in the United States' 2-1 victory over Uruguay in a friendly on Sunday and will miss the World Cup, the US soccer federation said.

"I'm extremely disappointed for Chris," said US coach Bruce Arena. "Chris has been an outstanding performer with our team and a fine professional. We are indebted to his service to the US national team. He will certainly serve as an inspiration to his teammates this summer."

A decision on a replacement is expected to take place in the next

few days.

Armas, the feisty and irreplaceable workhorse of the midfield, tore the anterior cruciate ligament of his right knee in the match at Washington's RFK Stadium, when he apparently took a mis-step as he was tracking down Uruguay's Fabian O'Neill along the right wing.

Armas played another eight minutes before being replaced by Pablo Mastroeni, and was then taken to hospital, where an MRI revealed the tear.

"I'm extremely disappointed," said Armas. "More so for my family, parents and friends who had all booked their tickets to the World Cup. It was a very odd play -- a movement that I have made a thousand times."

"I had just planted on my right

foot and I felt the knee go. In life these things happen."

Right now I don't think it's fully sunk in, but I will be focusing on supporting my teammates in the World Cup."

Armas, 29, has earned 45 caps for the United States since 1996.

A perennial starter, he played in 13 of 15 games for the USA in 2001, tied for most on the team. He tied for second most appearances during 2002 World Cup qualification, starting 14 of 16 matches.

The injury is eerily similar and equally disappointing to one that Armas suffered in the Summer of 2000 after he had been named as one of three over-age players to be added to the US Under-23 Men's National Team for the 2000 Olympics.

Belgium lose Baseggio



AFP, Brussels

Belgium's World Cup hopes were dealt a further blow Monday after midfielder Walter Baseggio was ruled unfit for the finals in two weeks by the Belgium Football Federation.

The news comes a day after striker Emile Mpenza ruled himself out of the trip to the Far East from May 31 to June 30 with a muscle injury and brings to five the number of players out of the squad.

The Belgium team doctor explained that 23-year-old

Baseggio, who plays for first division Anderlecht, was suffering from a recurring knee friction problem, which prevented him from training Monday.

The injury means Belgium coach Robert Waseige will have to juggle his striking resources in friendlies against Algeria on Tuesday and France next Saturday.

Waseige has already seen his World Cup plans hit by injury to key defender Joos Valgaeren with a hernia, along with striker Bob Peeters (left foot) and defender Philippe Clement (left thigh).

Belgium are in Group H in the finals, which start on May 31, along with Japan, Russia and Tunisia.

and they did not respect anything. At that time they thought that merchandising was more important than the team and players.

"When the business is more important than the football I just give up, rather than be treated like a pair of socks or a shirt."

"The manager (Ferguson) agreed with me at the time," said Cantona, whose shock revelations are made in The Ferguson Factor, a documentary to be screened tonight on BBC1.

Cantona blasts MU



INTERNET, London

Former Manchester United hero Eric Cantona has launched an astonishing attack on United over his shock exit from Old Trafford in 1997.

The Frenchman claimed he was "betrayed" by the United board, where people were only interested in making money, the Mirror reported.

Cantona said: "I signed a contract



PHOTO: INTERNET

Ajax Amsterdam's Swedish international striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic celebrates with team mate Christian Chivu (L) after scoring the golden goal in the Dutch cup final against FC Utrecht in Rotterdam on May 12.