

Zidane a Ronaldo fan

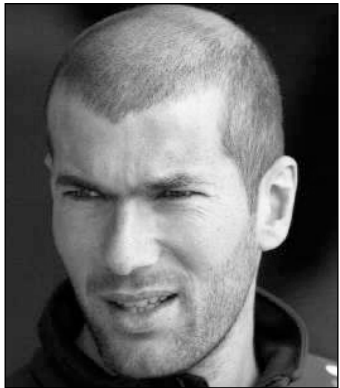
Football
AP, Paris

French soccer star Zinedine Zidane says Ronaldo deserves the prestigious Golden Ball award based on his two goals in the World Cup final.

"For sure, scoring in the final is something exceptional," Zidane told Tuesday's edition of the magazine *France Football*, which awards the Golden Ball at the end of the year. "He scored the two goals for the title. It makes you dream."

Ronaldo, whose career has been hampered by injury in recent years, staged a brilliant revival in Japan and South Korea. He scored both goals for Brazil's 2-0 win over Germany in the final, and was the tournament's leading scorer with eight goals.

"For the Golden Ball, yes, he deserves it," Zidane said. "It's not



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

best European-based player. Ronaldo plays for Italian club Internazionale and Kahn plays for Germany's Bayern Munich. Zidane is Spanish side Real Madrid's biggest star.

Zidane, who won the award in 1998 after netting two goals for France in the World Cup final against Brazil, said Ronaldo's return to form wasn't a surprise.

"For me, he has always been the best," Zidane said. "With the ordeal he's been through, not three people would have said he would pull it off. And yet, he did."

This year's World Cup ended in disaster for Zidane when France got knocked out of the first round. He missed the first two matches because of injury and was barely match-ready for the last game against Denmark, which France lost 2-0.

However, Zidane clinched the Champions League title for Real with a breathtaking goal in May.

Spurs almost had him!

Football
REUTERS, London

Tottenham Hotspur manager Glenn Hoddle has revealed he made a bid to sign Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo before he joined AC Milan last weekend.

Hoddle told the London Evening Standard that Rivaldo, available on a free transfer from Spanish giants Barcelona, was on the verge of signing for the premier league club after meeting chairman Daniel Levy on Friday.

The player's wage demands eventually proved a stumbling block, but Hoddle was pleased Spurs had come so close to signing one of the world's best players.

"We were close to getting him and I know that Daniel put in a supreme effort on our behalf," Hoddle said. "This illustrates the high nature of our ambition and the fact that we prefer to operate away from the spotlight."

"It goes without saying that a player of Rivaldo's quality would have been a major boost to our squad."

"There are not many players of that class in the world game so when the chance of signing was there we had to move heaven and earth to try and bring him here."

"Unfortunately, it didn't happen this time but the search goes on. People keep telling us we need a forward but they are being naive if they think we don't already appreciate that fact."

"We are well served in defence and midfield with possibly the best squad that this club has seen for some time."

Rivaldo, 30, was suitably impressed with Levy's efforts that he has thanked the Tottenham chairman for making such a determined bid.

"I was very excited about the possibility of playing for Spurs and in England," the Brazilian said. "I would like to thank the club for their efforts in trying to sign me."

Baggio welcomes Rivaldo

Football
AP, Milan

Veteran Italian striker Roberto Baggio became the latest to weigh in on Brazilian star Rivaldo's entrance into Italy's top soccer league, saying the fellow Golden Ball winner would fit in just fine here.

Baggio pointed out that Rivaldo's arrival -- the most sensational signing of an otherwise quiet summer in this soccer market -- added one more Golden Ball winner after himself and Ronaldo of Inter Milan to Serie A.

The pony-tailed Brescia striker gave himself a Brazilian-style nickname.

"We are not in Serie B that is official. At the moment the council is looking at hypotheses about us playing in Serie C," said the spokesman.

Fiorentina president Vittorio



ROBERTO BAGGIO

name of his own to sum it all up: "Ronaldo, Rivaldo and Baggioaldo."

The Golden Ball is an award given to the best players in Europe each year. Baggio won the award in 1993, Ronaldo in 1997 and Rivaldo was voted best player in 1999.

Rivaldo signed a multi-million dollar deal to play for AC Milan over the weekend, meaning that he and Ronaldo -- a teammate from Brazil's World Cup win this summer -- now play for archrival club teams in the same city.

"Rivaldo is without a doubt a great acquisition by Milan, he will definitely add to the spectacle of the upcoming season," Baggio said, according to *Gazzetta dello Sport* daily.

A former member of Milan, the 35-year-old Baggio is preparing to begin his 21st season as a professional with Brescia. In an extremely unpopular decision among Italian fans, he was left off his nation's World Cup squad this summer. But he is still regarded as one of the highest authorities in Italian soccer.

Season-ticket sales also were affected by Rivaldo's arrival, with Milan officials saying sales went wild Monday.

Romario joins Fluminense

Football
AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Romario, left out in the cold for the World Cup, has signed for Brazilian First Division club Fluminense, the player announced here on Thursday.

"I'm thrilled to be moving to Fluminense," said the 36-year-old who was famously shunned by coach Luiz Scolari for Brazil's triumphant World Cup campaign despite vociferous support for his selection from the public.

Although coy about his salary his monthly wage packet could amount to around 170,000 reais (51,000 euros) according to the local press.

Fluminense won the race to sign him chiefly over Flamengo, a club close to Romario's heart as he had a four-year spell there in the late 1990s.

"I hoped to be treated differently by Flamengo, but I'm used to the attitudes of their directors," he observed.

He added that he hoped to be ready to play for Fluminense in their opening league match against Cruzeiro on August 11.



ROMARIO

Blanco prefers home

Football
REUTERS, Mexico City

Volatile Mexican striker Cuauhtemoc Blanco, famous for his bunny hops as well as his goals, agreed to return home when he signed a one-year deal with his old club America.

Blanco, back in Mexico after an unhappy two years in Spain with Valladolid, said he turned down an offer from an unnamed English side before rejoining America.

"After the experience I had in Spain, I don't want to leave Mexico. I want to stay here," said the 29-year-old, who is nicknamed "the camel" because of his hunched shoulders and distinctive gait.

"I don't want to return to Europe. I had an offer from England but I didn't want to go. I'm happy with the Eagles (America)."

The striker, who returns to the side he left two years ago, will team up with veteran Chilean marksman Ivan Zamorano as America -- Mexico's richest and most powerful club -- try to end a 13-year wait for the domestic title.

Blanco played for Mexico in the last two World Cups but his experience in South Korea and Japan ended in disappointment as his country were beaten by the United States in the second round.

He is best known for his trademark bunny hops, dubbed "Cuauhteminas", which involve him jumping through a gap between two opponents while clasp the ball between his ankles.

America, semi-finalists in this year's South American Libertadores Cup, begin their campaign with a "clasico" against Guadalajara on August 11 -- the biggest fixture on the Mexican calendar.

The footballer is continuing physiotherapy and is expected to return to Italy next week



CUAUHTEMOC BLANCO

Phenomenon keeps a promise

Football
AFP, Rio de Janeiro

One month after scoring the two goals which gave his country their fifth World Cup title Brazilian star Ronaldo fulfilled his promise before the tournament of paying homage at the Basilica of the Holy Apparition in the state of Sao Paulo.

The Inter Milan star arrived by helicopter Tuesday at the Basilica to thank the country's patron saint for having regained his physical form after two career-threatening knee operations.

Ronaldo was prevented from attending mass because of the large number of fans with security officers called in to calm the commotion in the sacristy and allow the star to approach the altar of Santa Aparecida.

Ronaldo will visit a cancer hospital in Rio de Janeiro this week to donate part of his prizemoney in addition to a group created to assist abandoned children.

The footballer is continuing physiotherapy and is expected to return to Italy next week



RONALDO



PHOTO: AFP

Olimpia's former Paraguay international Miguel Angelo Benitez executing a scissor-kick during the second final of the Copa Libertadores de America championship against Brazil's Sao Caetano in Sao Paulo on July 31.

Fiorentina is history?

Football
REUTERS, Milan

Former Italian champions Fiorentina have been refused a place in Serie B for next season and their best hope of surviving as a professional club is a place in the third or fourth division.

The troubled Florence club, relegated from Serie A last season and in administration, have reported debts of around 22 million euro and the federal council of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) is meeting to discuss what level the team will be allowed to play in next term.

A spokesman for Fiorentina told Reuters that the club had not been granted permission by the council to play in the Second Division, Serie B, next season.

"We are not in Serie B that is official. At the moment the council is looking at hypotheses about us playing in Serie C," said the spokesman.

Fiorentina president Vittorio

Cecchi Gori promised he would find the necessary cash before his Thursday deadline but so far there has been no sign of the capital injection needed to save the club.

It is likely that Ternana, who finished 17th in Serie B last season will have their relegation overturned and stay in the Second Division.

Italian Football League president Adriano Galliani had earlier said his body would do what it can to try and help Fiorentina.

"We will try and do something for Fiorentina," he said. "They are club who are part of the heritage of Italian football and need to be protected but within the rules."

"Football would be poorer without Fiorentina but we have to wait for the decision of the federal council," said Galliani.

The club has a number of international players, such as Portugal's Nuno Gomes, Yugoslav Predrag Mijatovic and Italy international Enrico Chiesa, who in normal circumstances could have been sold to pay off the debt.

But, with many Italian clubs suffering from a shortage of cash, the transfer market is quiet and the

Intertoto Cup Advantage Fulham

Football
REUTERS, London

Midfielder Sean Davis put Fulham in the driving seat against Sochaux with a last-minute goal that gave the English premier league club a 1-0 win in the first leg of their Intertoto Cup semi-final.

The pre-match hype had centred around Junichi Inamoto's debut for the London club, but the Japanese international struggled after coming on as a second half substitute.

With a 0-0 draw looming, Davis, the England under-21 international, latched on to the ball two minutes into injury time to give Fulham a narrow lead to take into next week's second leg in France.

Fulham's premier league rivals Aston Villa were denied victory by another French club when Lille's Fernando D'Amico scored a last-gasp equaliser from a free kick to cancel out Ian Taylor's 83rd minute effort in a 1-1 draw.

Villa nearly made a dream start after just four minutes when Peter Crouch found the back of the net, but the goal was disallowed.

Mile Sterjovski went close for the home side in the 51st minute when he raced on to a through ball from D'Amico, but could only find the side netting.

The Intertoto Cup format has six semi-finals, with the winners progressing to three finals to decide the three qualifiers for next season's UEFA Cup.

In Wednesday's other matches, Germany's VfB Stuttgart beat Slaven Belupo of Croatia 2-1, Italy's Bologna crushed Teplice of the Czech Republic 5-1, Spain's Malaga defeated Dutch side Willem II Tilburg 2-1 and Villarreal of Spain drew 0-0 with French team Troyes.

In Champions League second qualifying round action, an injury hit Dynamo Kiev head into next Wednesday's second leg with a healthy advantage after thrashing 10-man Pyunik Yerevan 4-0.

Despite Kiev missing several key players, including captain Vladislav Vaschuk, the Armenian champions let in three goals in the final 25 minutes after Jose Bilibio was sent off in the 64th minute.

With Kiev firmly in control, their possible next round opponents Skonto Riga and Levski Sofia battled out a goalless draw in the

Latvian capital.

In Oporto, Elpidio Silva struck twice as Portuguese side Boavista hammered Hibernians of Malta 4-0.

Silva opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 15th minute before Alexandre Goulart made it 2-0. Silva added his second goal of the game in the 29th minute and Fernando Avalos completed the rout with two minutes to go.

In Stockholm, Swedish First Division champions Hammarby scraped a 1-1 draw with Partizan Belgrade. Fredrik Winsnes netted in the 17th minute for the home side but Partizan refused to give up and equalised 20 minutes later through Danko Lazovic.

The winners of the tie have the enticing prospect of facing four times European champions Bayern Munich in the next round.

Meanwhile, Zilina of Slovakia



PHOTO: INTERNET

Belgium's Club Brugge's Andres Mendoza (R) is being congratulated by team mate Peter Van der Heyden (L) after scoring for the second time against Dinamo Bucharest during their Intertoto Cup second qualifying round first leg match.

Libertadores Cup Olimpia's

Football
REUTERS, Sao Paulo

Paraguay's Olimpia won the Libertadores Cup for the third time on Wednesday, coming from behind to beat Brazilians Sao Caetano 2-1 in the second leg of the final and then winning a penalty shootout 4-2.

Olimpia, beaten 1-0 at home in last week's first leg and in apparent disarray after the shock resignation of the club president on Monday, seemed to be in more trouble when Ailton gave Sao Caetano a first-half lead.

But goals by Gaston Cordoba and Richart Baez within 15 minutes of the restart made the aggregate score 2-2 and Olimpia held on for penalties despite having midfielder Victor Quintana sent off for the second game in a row.

Olimpia converted their first four penalties in the shootout while Sao Caetano's Marlon and Serginho both skied their efforts wildly over the bar to give the Paraguayans the title in the fourth successive Libertadores final to be settled by a shootout.

It was another heartbreaking evening for the team known as the "Big Blue" (Azulao), beaten finalists in the Brazilian championship for the past two years.

Olimpia's triumph came 48 hours after president Osvaldo Dominguez Dibb stormed out of the club, claiming his players lacked commitment and making serious allegations of indiscipline off the field.

It also came one week after the club celebrated their centenary and six months after Nery Pumpido -- the goalkeeper in the Argentina team which won the 1986 World Cup -- took over as coach.

Sao Caetano, who were only founded in 1989 and did not play at first-division level until two years ago, were poised to complete their astonishing rise after last week's win in Asuncion.

Victory seemed even more likely in the 32nd minute when veteran midfielder Ailton played a perfect one-two with striker Somalia on the edge of the penalty area before placing his shot wide of goalkeeper Ricardo Tavarelli.

But Olimpia, who ousted defending champions Boca Juniors in the quarterfinals and former champions

Gremio in the semis, looked dangerous.

They had started brightly and wasted an excellent early chance when striker Baez headed wide of an open goal after Sergio Orteman had crossed from the byline.

Orteman went close with a header before halftime and then Sao Caetano coach Jair Picerni was sent off during a touchline scuffle involving a number of players.

Olimpia needed only 13 minutes of the second half to turn the game around.

Cordoba, who had a shot blocked by team-mate Baez immediately after the restart, equalised in the 49th minute with an angled shot after Orteman had chested down a cross.

A high center was again Sao Caetano's undoing nine minutes later when Baez beat two defenders to the ball and his header looped over goalkeeper Silvio Luiz.

Olimpia then sat back and handed the initiative to Sao Caetano, who hit the bar with a header from central defender Daniel.

But the Brazilians were never able to get their usual passing game going, even after Quintana's dismissal.

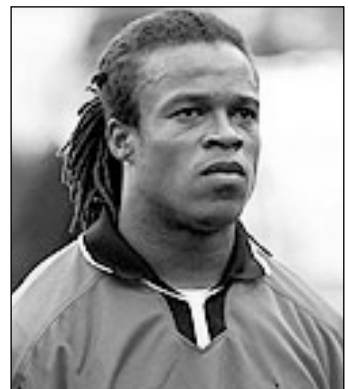
The hard man of the Olimpia midfield, returning from suspension after his sending-off in the semi-final second leg against Gremio, saw red again after a wild lung at Russo earned him a second yellow card.

Juve releasing Davids?

INTERNET, Turin

After the bad brawl he had on the pitch and in the dressing-rooms with AC Milan player Cosmin Contra, during yesterday's TIM Trophy (in which FC Internazionale also participated), Juventus seem even more interested in accepting AS Roma offers for Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids.

The umpteenth brawl that saw him as the protagonist in fact suggested that the Juventus management want to sell him to avoid tranquility difficulties with his teammates.



EDGAR DAVIDS

According to rumours Marcello Lippi has already chosen a possible substitute for Davids: Parma's French midfielder Sabri Lamouchi, who would cost around 7 million dollars.

After the doping suspension Davids has frequently exhibited this type of uncontrolled behaviour: yesterday was only a friendly, but he was still given a red card.

During the championship Lippi wants to count on a player who does not have these type of problems that risk lengthy suspensions.

Macca sees no Real need

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid midfielder Steve McManaman believes that the Spanish First Division club have no need to buy in more players to strengthen their Champions League winning squad.

"Right now we are the best team in Europe and we don't need to sign new players," McManaman, who has 37 England caps, was quoted as saying on the club's official website on Tuesday.

"I don't understand why teams in Spanish football want so many players. We already have a lot of very good players, most of whom are internationals."

McManaman's comments come at a time when sections of the Spanish sporting press have expressed their concern that the club have not signed any new players in the close season.

Although Real won the European Cup for the ninth time last season, a number of commentators have pointed to the need to strengthen the team's defence.

The departure of centre-back Aitor Karanka on a free transfer to Athletic Bilbao and Cameroon defender Geremi's loan move to Middlesbrough have fuelled calls for the club to splash out on a new recruit.

But the club's sporting director Jorge Valdano has made it clear that no new signings will be made unless the club can make reductions in its large and expensively-assembled squad.

Barca sporting director leaves

AFP, Barcelona

Sporting director Lorenzo Serra Ferrer officially left Spanish giants Barcelona on Wednesday after having reached an agreement on the termination of his contract, the club said.

Serra Ferrer appears to be a casualty of the new era and the second spell of Louis van Gaal as club coach.

Ironically it was Serra Ferrer who had replaced van Gaal two years ago and his 2000/01 season at the helm was a disaster - no Spanish First Division title and elimination in the first round of the Champions League.