

Baggio eyes elite mark



ROBERTO BAGGIO

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Former European Player of the Year Roberto Baggio says he is ready to continue his career in the hope that he can reach the milestone of 200 Serie A goals.

Baggio, who has scored 181 goals in Serie A, is out of contract but is expected to sign a new deal to keep him with Serie A side Brescia for two more seasons.

"There is a good possibility that I will play with Brescia and I will be delighted with that," Baggio told the daily Gazzetta dello Sport on Saturday.

"I hope to get to 200 goals in Serie A as soon as possible - Brescia permitting," added Baggio, who has been with Brescia since September 2000 when he joined them from Inter Milan.

The former Juventus striker had

a knee operation last season, which wrecked his hopes of making Italy's World Cup squad.

"I wanted that World Cup but I have to forget about it. I still have the desire to play and I hope to do so in Italy," said Baggio, who played in the 1990, 1994 and 1998 World Cups.

Baggio has scored more Serie A goals than any other player currently active in the top flight.

Only five players have ever scored 200 Serie A goals -- former Milan strikers Giuseppe Altafina and Gunnar Nordahl, Angelo Schiavio, who played for Bologna in the 1920's and 1930's, former Inter Milan forward Giuseppe Meazza and Silvio Piola, who is the all-time top scorer in Serie A history with 290 goals, almost half of them with Rome club Lazio.

The only other Serie A players close to joining the '200 club' are AS Roma forward Gabriel Batistuta who has 178 goals and Bologna's Giuseppe Signori who has 170.

Irish PM enters Sky row

Football

REUTERS, Dublin

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern has intervened in a furore over terrestrial television coverage of home internationals after the country's soccer authorities sold the rights to Britain's Sky TV.

The Football Association of Ireland's (FAI) move last week, when it signed a four-year contract, sparked uproar among Irish fans angry that they would be forced to stump up for a Sky subscription or go to the pub to watch the matches.

Soccer-mad Ahern, who has himself expressed disappointment at the deal, called for talks with the FAI after it emerged on Thursday that a European Union directive could keep the matches on terrestrial television if the government drew up a list of protected events -- including home internationals.

"It would appear to be the case that we have legal options open to us," Deputy Prime Minister Mary Harney told reporters ahead of Ahern's meeting with the FAI.

She said she hoped the discussions would result in the soccer matches being shown on terrestrial screens after all.

Arsene foresees transfer chaos

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has warned of a transfer market crash because of the financial woes of European soccer.

"We all thought a big accident would happen soon. Well, the car has really hit the wall," the Frenchman was quoted as saying on Friday.

"There have been fewer big signings this summer than ever before and I put that down to the disastrous financial situation for football throughout Europe," he told British daily The Sun.

Wenger signed defender Pascal Cygan from French club Lille on Thursday and has been told by Arsenal that there is money available to finance further signings.

But he has watched as some of his rivals have been forced to cut back to reduce their debts.

Leeds United's new manager Terry Venables has been told to claw back 15 million pounds from the sale of players whilst Chelsea's Claudio Ranieri is restricted to recruiting on free transfers or loan deals.

"I have been offered players who have not been paid for six or seven months. When clubs find themselves in that situation you know

there is a deep problem," Wenger said.

"Everybody has suddenly become a bit wiser. At Arsenal we have never spent crazy money but even for us it is difficult to go out and make a major signing now.

"Because the market is so flat it is almost impossible to calculate a player's resale value.

"If you spend 12 million pounds or 15 million pounds on a player today he could be worth nothing on the market next year. How can you invest money and not budget to get anything back?"

Catalan derby

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid will take on Catalan giants Barcelona at the Nou Camp in their first game back in the Primera Liga.

The fixture list, released by Spain's Football Federation on Friday gave Atletico, who were relegated in 2000, a dream return to the top flight with the pick of the first round of matches, to be played on August 31 and September 1.

Champions Valencia will kick off the defence of their title with a trip to Real Mallorca, while Real Madrid are at home to Espanyol.

The league season is due to finish over the weekend of June 21-

Give Rivaldo, take Mendieta

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti is hoping to bring Brazilian forward Rivaldo to the Rome club in a swap deal involving Spanish midfielder Gaizka Mendieta.

Rivaldo is under contract with Barcelona until July 2003 while Mendieta only joined Lazio last season from Valencia.

"The Mendieta-Rivaldo swap could happen," Cragnotti was quoted as saying by Italian newspapers on Saturday.

"Barcelona need to talk to the player but I hope we can produce a deal which will bring another great star to Lazio," he added.

"We are waiting to learn of the Brazilian's intentions. We hope that the deal can reach a good end,"

Cragnotti said.

Rivaldo was joint second-top scorer in the World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan with five goals and was a key part of the Brazil team that beat Germany 2-0

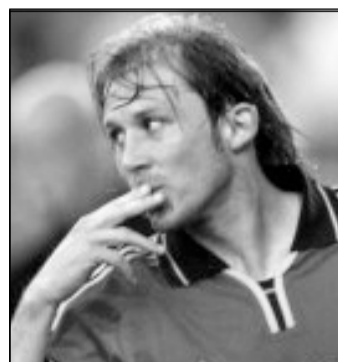


RIVALDO

in the final to claim their fifth world title.

The future of the 30-year-old former World Player of the Year at Barcelona has been brought into doubt following the appointment of Dutch coach Louis van Gaal.

Rivaldo had several run-ins with



MENDIETA

the Dutchman during the coach's first spell at the club and was linked

with a move to Lazio on a number of occasions.

Mendieta joined Lazio from Valencia last season but has been left largely on the sidelines at the Italian club and has hinted he would like to return to Spain.

Cragnotti also said that Lazio captain, Italy international defender Alessandro Nesta, would stay with the Rome club unless a serious offer was received.

Lazio have had talks with Inter Milan and Juventus about a possible sale of Nesta but Cragnotti said the club's terms have not been met. "We have not put Nesta up for sale. We have only said we are open to serious offers. Until now there has not been any offer worthy of a jewel of our family like Alessandro," said Cragnotti.

"If no-one presents a high offer, Nesta will stay with us for all of next season," added the Lazio chief.

Sir Alex losing sleep

Football

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has confessed to becoming "a bit edgy" in his efforts to strengthen his side's defence ahead of the English premier league season.

Ferguson confirmed his interest in Leeds United defender Rio Ferdinand but has not tabled a bid as United await developments at Elland Road regarding the 23-year-old England international's immediate future.

"It has been disappointing that we haven't secured anyone yet and I am getting a bit edgy," Ferguson told Friday's Manchester Evening News.

"But it won't be the case that we will go into the season with less players in the squad - we will have new players in place.

"The Rio Ferdinand thing is an issue and we are waiting on things developing at the moment.

"It is not our job to antagonise people and there'll be no war of words, but Leeds have said themselves that we are the club that has talked to them about Rio so it is no secret.

"If he is available then we'd be interested - but it is not clear-cut. We will work away and we have alternatives and other thoughts."

Ferdinand's value has soared since his impressive displays for England in the World Cup finals last month, but new Leeds manager Terry Venables is keen to hold onto his man.

Ferguson, who had already

targeted the former West Ham United centreback thanks to his growing impact in the premier league since joining Leeds for 18 million pounds, confessed that individual performances in the Far East had further complicated his off-season shopping list.

"The World Cup beat us because two or three players emerged over there that we had made enquiries for before the World Cup started," said Ferguson, who has also been linked with Blackburn Rovers' Ireland winger Damien Duff.

still needs to replace Ronny Johnsen and Denis Irwin, who were both released at the end of last season.

"We are short in defence because when you lose the likes of Denis Irwin and Ronny Johnsen you are losing a lot of experience there," Ferguson said.

"We haven't drawn up a big list of potential targets. You don't do that when you are trying to achieve what we are trying to achieve.

"With the quality and type of player we want to bring to the club



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Veteran French defender Laurent Blanc has eased Ferguson's defensive worries somewhat by agreeing a new 12-month deal at Old Trafford.

But the Reds' manager says he

you only have a list of four or five players who are operating at the highest level who you feel would come here and enhance the team."

Djorkaeff's Bolton ending?

Football

REUTERS, Bolton

Youri Djorkaeff has hinted he will end his career at Bolton Wanderers after signing a new two-year deal with the English Premier League club.

The 34-year-old, who helped France win Euro 2000 and the 1998 World Cup, said he had no hesitation in rejoining the side he helped save from relegation last season during a three-month loan spell from German club Kaiserslautern.

"It was never an issue for me and maybe now I will finish my career here," Djorkaeff told reporters at the Reebok Stadium.

"But for now I am here to play, score goals and win games to give the fans pleasure.

"I said I would come back to Bolton if I felt the atmosphere and spirit we had last season could be repeated.

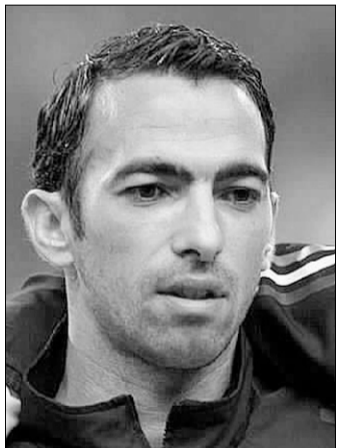
"The manager, Sam Allardyce, said he hoped so too and has since signed some great players to strengthen the side.

"Jay Jay Okocha came, Bolent Akin came from Turkey and tomorrow maybe another top player will arrive to take us step by step towards success.

Djorkaeff is Allardyce's fourth

recruit of the off-season after Nigeria's World Cup captain Okocha, who signed from Paris St Germain, Galatasaray midfielder Bulent and young English striker Delroy Facey.

"Now I think with the spirit of this



YOURI DJORKAEFF

team we can achieve things," the Frenchman said.

Djorkaeff, who has been allocated the number 13 shirt, added: "During my holiday I never thought I would not be coming back to Bolton.

"I have become very happy here and it was not a hard decision to come to. I spoke to the manager in

Korea during the (World Cup finals) and everything was sorted out very quickly.

"Now, towards the end of my career, it is important for me to give something back to Bolton for showing their faith in me."

Djorkaeff was hailed as the club's greatest signing when he arrived at the Reebok Stadium in February and subsequently helped Bolton survive a relegation battle.

His four goals in 12 league games, plus a string of assists, proved a significant contribution.

Assistant manager Phil Brown believes the Frenchman's goal-poaching instincts could give Bolton the edge again next season.

"Youri brings a smile to the club and the spirit for which we are renowned will hopefully be better known around the world with him being here," Brown said.

"He also brings a quality that we didn't have and he has the extra ability to unlock the door of strong defences like Manchester United and Arsenal when the games are tight."

Bolton chairman Phil Gartside said that veteran Icelandic defender Gudni Bergsson was "almost certainly" staying with the club after agreeing to a new one-year contract.

Rotten Russia

Football

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia's soccer chief has denounced his national team and coach Oleg Romantsev following the country's dismal World Cup showing.

"It was a faceless team," Vyacheslav Koloskov, president of the Russian Football Union, told a news conference on Friday.

"Romantsev's team had no clear vision how to play in particular situations, how to defend, how to make the transition from defence to attack," he said.

"But more important, it had no team spirit."

Koloskov also criticised

Romantsev over tactics. "Team tactics are one of the most important elements in modern-day football," he said.

"Unfortunately, in Romantsev's team, very little time was spent on tactics."

Koloskov said the RFU had spared no expense to give the team excellent training conditions.

"The team and Romantsev had everything they needed," he said. "We spent a lot of money on scouting and had a complete dossier on our opponents, but the information was not used."

Romantsev quit after Russia failed to advance from what was regarded as one of the easiest first-round World Cup groups. They beat Tunisia 2-0 in their opening match, but then went down 1-0 to Japan

and 3-2 to Belgium.

Romantsev was replaced this week by Valery Gazzayev, who immediately promised to rebuild the team from scratch.

Koloskov backed Gazzayev by saying Russia needed fundamental changes ahead of their Euro 2004 qualifying campaign.

"My position is clear: 'The national team needs fundamental changes'. No minor changes will do this time," he said. "But time is running out and there is a lot of work to be done."

Russia, who are drawn with Ireland, Switzerland, Georgia and Albania, will have just one friendly at home against Sweden next month before their first group 10 match against the Irish in Dublin on September 7.

Pay cuts for Serie A stars

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Soccer players in Italy are ready to accept performance-related pay, including a possible 20 per cent wages-cut if relegated, as Serie A attempts to deal with its cash crisis, says players' union chief Sergio Campana.

Players' wages have doubled in Italy over the past four years while clubs' income has barely risen, leaving many teams facing hefty debts.

Campana, president of the Italian Footballers Union (AIC), says the players are ready to accept flexible terms in their contracts.

"From now on the contracts will be flexible. One part will be fixed another part will be based on performance - results, goals scored or saved and other factors," Campana told the daily Gazzetta dello Sport.

"This means the players have accepted the principle that they will get enough and the extra will only come if the club gains additional resources."

The union chief said he was ready for talks with Italian soccer officials in a bid to reach an accord on pay, adding that a new deal could include an automatic 20 per cent pay cut for players whose teams are relegated.

Italian newspapers released details on Friday of the top earners in Serie A with Inter Milan's Uruguayan striker Alvaro Recoba topping the table with an annual salary of 8 million euros.

Roma's Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta and their Italian captain Francesco Totti are reported to be earning 6 million euros while Inter Milan's Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldo is estimated to be on 4.5 million euros.

The fear that such high labour costs could be put clubs finances in danger appears to be being borne out by the unusually quiet transfer market during the close season.

Even the normally free-spending big clubs have restricted themselves to swap deals and free transfers, with cash deals at just a tiny fraction of previous close seasons.

It is clear that a league once renowned for attracting the best players in the world on the basis of the 'lure of the lira' is suffering from a

severe shortage of capital. Figures released recently by accounting firm Deloitte and Touche for the 2000-2001 season show that players' wages in Serie A rose 32 per cent from the previous year, while the clubs' income hardly rose at all and ticket revenue fell.

The result was a loss of 133 million euros for Serie A as a whole compared with a profit of 35 million euros the previous year.

To add to the problem, eight clubs from the top two divisions have yet to sign television deals for next season, casting even more doubt over their financial futures.

The new Serie A season is scheduled to kick off on September 1, although Roma president Franco Sensi has suggested a postponement until October to give clubs time to resolve their budget problems, a suggestion that is unlikely, however, to win many backers.

Donovan says no to L'kusen

INTERNET, undated

Bayer Leverkusen are set for show-down talks with Landon Donovan after the USA striker revealed he has no intention of returning to the club when his loan spell at the San Jose Earthquakes expires in October.

"I had a bitter experience and it's kind of hard for me to forget what happened there," he said. "Obviously the people at Leverkusen have a huge say in it, but I've made it clear that I don't want to be there."

"We have spoken with Leverkusen and I made it very clear that I'd like to stay here - not only from a soccer standpoint," Donovan said.

"I love my family, I love my coaches, I love my organisation here and there's something to be said for waking up every day and seeing sunshine outside. People often forget that."

Donovan failed to make the grade in his first spell at Bayer after signing as a 16-year-old in 1999. He returned to the MLS on loan without starting a match for the BayArena club.

Since then, he has grown in stature with every season and, after leading the San Jose Earthquakes to the MLS title in 2001, shone for the USA at the World Cup, scoring twice as Bruce Arena's side reached the quarter-finals.

Ahn irritates Perugia again



AHN JUNG-HWAN

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Italian club Perugia have suspended the pay of their South Korean striker Ahn Jung-hwan after the player failed to turn up for pre-season training.

The move is the latest in a bitter spat between the Serie A club and the South Korean whose goal knocked Italy out of the World Cup.

Perugia said in a statement on their website that despite having taken up an option to sign Ahn on a contract until June 2005, the player had not appeared for pre-season training.

"In a few words, in the coming season Ahn will not receive one euro or one dollar if he does not come here and undergo his medical and put himself at the disposition of our coach," said the club.

Perugia, who agreed a fee of 1.6 million dollars for Ahn, said the

player had sent three faxes to the club saying he had no intention of playing for the Umbrian team.

Ahn had been on loan at Perugia from his South Korean club Pusan Icons for the past two seasons.

"The option has been taken up therefore the player should be considered to all effects a registered player of Perugia," the club said.

Ahn was told he would "never set foot in Perugia again" by club president Luciano Gaucci after his 'golden goal' header ended the hopes of Giovanni Trapattoni's side as they lost 2-1 in the second round of last month's World Cup.

Gaucci later softened his stance and decided to take up the option on the striker, but it is now likely that Perugia will try to cash in on Ahn's success at the finals by selling him.

"Any eventual future destination for Ahn with another club needs to have the necessary agreement of Perugia, otherwise no transfer can be considered valid," said the club's statement.

Two Iran booters lashed

REUTERS, Tehran

Two members of the Iranian national soccer team have received dozens of lashes for "moral corruption", the state-owned Iran newspaper said on Saturday.

It said unnamed players had been identified by videos and photographs found in a raid on an illegal Tehran brothel. One of the players received 170 lashes and the other 70. Six players were given cash fines.

The players confessed their crimes and vowed to lead an honourable life. They said they had been invited to a party after their elimination from the 1998 World Cup finals in France where they had been "trapped" in the "vice network".

The newspaper said the court procedures took 15 months to complete, but did not say when the sentences were carried out.

Euro giants to play for noble cause

AP, East Rutherford

European champions Real Madrid and Italian giants AS Roma will play an exhibition game on August 8 at Giants Stadium.

The game, marking the 100th anniversary of the Madrid club, will be a fundraiser for the Global AIDS Fund.

Among the international stars expected to play in the game are Real's Zinedine Zidane, Roberto Carlos, Luis Figo and Raul. They led Real to the European Champions League crown this year.

For Roma, the stars are Francesco Totti, Cafu and Gabriel Batistuta.

Saez named Spanish coach

AP, Madrid

Inaki Saez was hired Friday to replace Jose Antonio Camacho as coach of Spain's soccer team.

Saez had coached junior national teams, leading Spain to the 1998 European Under-21 title, the 1999 FIFA World Youth Championship for players under 20 and a second-place finish at the 2000 Sydney Olympic soccer tournament, limited primarily to players under 17.

Last week, Saez was appointed interim coach following the resignation of Camacho, whose team was eliminated by South Korea in the World Cup quarterfinals.

Spain's national team has not won a major title since the 1964 European Championship.

'Sign me Juve or else'

BBC, London

Olivier Dacourt's agent has challenged Juventus to sign the French midfielder quickly or else risk losing him.

Bruno Satin has given the Serie A club until the end of the weekend to sign Dacourt.

He said: "If a deal is not done soon then I think Olivier will stay at Leeds."

"There is no question he is happy at Leeds. He likes the city and the club."

Juventus are keen to sign Dacourt and are ready to meet Leeds' asking price.

But their ability to find the money depends on them being unable to offload Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids to either Roma or Lazio.

That in turn has been held up by deadlocked negotiations between Lazio and Juventus over Italian international defender Alessandro Nesta.

Dacourt fancies a move to Arsenal, who are keen to sign a holding midfield player after releasing Gilles Grimandi and Junichi Inamoto.

But Arsenal are almost certain to balk at Leeds' demands.