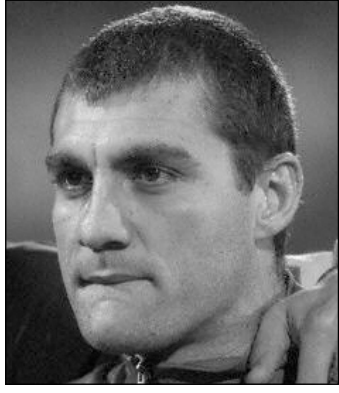


Superstars set example



RONALDO



CHRISTIAN VIERI



ALVARO RECOBA

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan strikers Ronaldo, Christian Vieri and Alvaro Recoba, three of the world's best paid footballers, have offered to take pay cuts to help their club through the financial crisis hitting Italian football.

Inter said on its official Web site Saturday that the idea of the cut, of between 5-10 percent, came from Italy international Vieri, who called Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldo who later contacted Recoba.

"We spoke to each other and decided to do something. A direct gesture, above all to make our president (Massimo Moratti) understand that we care about Inter, and we know what it means to do everything possible so that Inter can become stronger and bigger each year," Vieri said.

"The president has supported us in every moment. And we wanted to make a concrete gesture, a gesture as Inter players.

"It doesn't count how much, we won't bring accountants into it. What is important is to take the initiative."

Vieri, currently on holiday in Spain, called Ronaldo in Rio de Janeiro, who in turn called the Inter squad's summer training camp in Bormio to speak to Recoba. The

Uruguayan playmaker then called Inter president Moratti, who was initially contacted by Vieri.

Recoba is the best paid player in Italy, reportedly earning an annual salary of 8 million euros (US dollars 7.9 million), although he took issue with that figure.

"Maybe it makes my father happy to know that I earn certain sums, but the amounts written in the newspapers aren't those that I earn," he said. "Everyone likes to earn a lot, but on my contract there is a different figure."

But Recoba said that in times of austerity it was right that players accepted they could be paid less.

"If a club can't pay the players, then we need to be honest and accept a pay cut, for the good of everyone," said Recoba.

Twice former World Player of the Year Ronaldo, who scored both goals in Brazil's World Cup final win over Germany, is estimated to be on a 4.5 million euros (US dollars 4.4 million) salary as well as earning a large amount from sponsorship deals.

The trio's decision came a day after Italian sports newspapers, examining the growing debt problem in the game, published detailed lists of top players' contracts and salaries.

Although Inter president Moratti has spent millions on recruiting top internationals in recent years Inter have not won the Italian title since

Gerrard was willing

Football

INTERNET

Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard claims he could have delayed surgery on a groin problem and played through the pain barrier for England at the World Cup.

But the 22-year-old says he was not sure he could complete all England's group games and decided to stay at home.

I could still have gone and played but I wasn't confident that I could play in the three games in such a short space of time.

"I wasn't confident I could do the job I wanted to do."

Gerrard's injury problems meant he had to pick and choose his games in Liverpool's crowded fixture list, sometimes limiting himself to one match a week.

I know I could have been very selfish but I had to think about Liverpool and England.

In the end, he felt a similar situation in the crowded World Cup programme would not be fair to England.

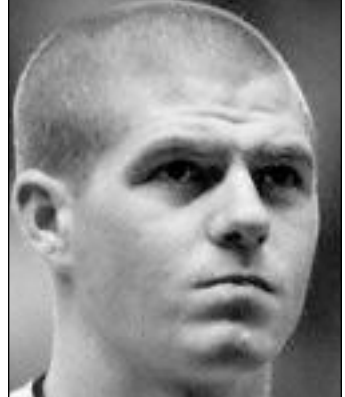
Gerrard said: "I had to think about the fact we were already carrying injuries."

"David Beckham and Kieron Dyer were not fully fit and I knew it would be a disaster if I had gone and broken down."

"I also knew that other players who could have done a better job because they were fitter, would miss out."

"I know I could have been very selfish - and I tell you, I wanted to go so badly - but I had to think about Liverpool and England."

"I had to be honest, I knew it would have been the wrong decision."



STEVEN GERRARD

Taskmaster Van Gaal

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Louis van Gaal got back down to serious business at Barcelona on Wednesday with a stark warning to his players about what will be expected of them.

"Work, work, work," van Gaal urged after taking training for the first time in his second spell at the Catalan club.

"If we work hard this year then maybe we have a chance of winning something."

Van Gaal won two league titles during his first spell in charge at Barcelona from 1997 to 2000.

His reappointment follows two barren seasons under Lorenc Serra Ferrer and Carles Rexach and the Dutch coach warned that getting back to winning ways would be difficult.

"For the last two years this team, helped by five or six very good players who have now left, failed to win anything," van Gaal said at a news conference after his squad, minus players who featured at the World Cup, returned to work.

"We can't now say it's going to be easy."

Van Gaal confirmed that Juan Roman Riquelme, the Argentine midfielder signed from Boca Juniors in an \$11 million deal, could be sent out on loan for his first season.

"I always look to the long term," said van Gaal, who already has a maximum of four non-European Union players in his squad.

"Riquelme is a fantastic player and he was available at a very good price."

River flow over Rangers

Football

INTERNET, East Rutherford, New Jersey

Second-half substitute Maimileano Lopez broke a 2-2 tie in the 79th minute to lead Argentina's River Plate to a 3-2 victory over Glasgow Rangers in an international friendly at Giants Stadium on Saturday.

Lopez, who replaced Nelson Cuevas in the 72nd minute, gathered in a long left-wing pass from Victor Zapata before he beat goalkeeper Stefan Kloos from eight yards to stifle Rangers' two-goal comeback before a crowd of 22,070.

The Argentine side had taken a 2-0 lead. Defender Celso Ayala connected from three yards out in the 18th minute, taking a pass from Eduardo German Coudet at the top of the area. Zapata doubled the score in the 51st minute.

Shota Arvelsdze cut the lead in half for the Scottish side in the 62nd minute, scoring off a right-wing cross from Fernando Ricksen.

Rangers equalized in the 77th minute on a 30-yard free kick by Lorenzo Amoroso.

"I could definitely have decided to have surgery after the World Cup," he told the News of the World newspaper.

"I could still have gone and played but I wasn't confident that I could play in the three games in such a short space of time.

"I wasn't confident I could do the job I wanted to do."

Gerrard's injury problems meant he had to pick and choose his games in Liverpool's crowded fixture list, sometimes limiting himself to one match a week.

I know I could have been very selfish but I had to think about Liverpool and England.

In the end, he felt a similar situation in the crowded World Cup programme would not be fair to England.

Gerrard said: "I had to think about the fact we were already carrying injuries."

"David Beckham and Kieron Dyer were not fully fit and I knew it would be a disaster if I had gone and broken down."

"I also knew that other players who could have done a better job because they were fitter, would miss out."

"I know I could have been very selfish - and I tell you, I wanted to go so badly - but I had to think about Liverpool and England."

"I had to be honest, I knew it would have been the wrong decision."



PHOTO: AFP

Japan's outgoing French coach Philippe Troussier (L) is touched as he receives a flower bouquet from fans at Tokyo International Airport in Narita yesterday.

Bye Troussier



AFP, Tokyo

More than 500 Japanese football fans gathered Sunday to wave off Philippe Troussier, the French coach who piloted their national side into the World Cup to 16 for the first time, an airport official said.

"Thank you, Troussier!" the crowd shouted as Troussier boarded a flight to France at Japan's Narita international airport. A female fan gave him a bouquet of red flowers and most of the men in the

crowd wore the Japanese team's blue uniform and chanted his name.

Troussier, 47, took the Japan job after their winless World Cup finals debut in 1998. His contract with Japan expired when the World Cup finals co-hosted by Japan and South Korea ended on June 30.

Before coming to Japan, he spent nearly a decade in Africa coaching clubs and national sides in Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco and South Africa, earning the nickname, the "white witch-doctor."

He is currently on the shortlist of four candidates for the job of French national team manager.

Meanwhile, Japan's football J-League matches resumed Saturday three months after a halt due to the World Cup finals and 57,902 fans enjoyed the game between Urawa Red Diamonds and Jubilo Iwata at the stadium in Saitama, northwest of Tokyo.

A stadium official said Saturday's J-League match drew more crowds than the Japan-Belgium game in Saitama during the World Cup that attracted 55,256 people.

"Japan's soccer fever is not gone with the end of the World Cup," the stadium official said.

Iranian internationals face whipping

AFP, Tehran

Eight members of the Iranian national football squad have been sentenced to the whip for visiting prostitutes in the Islamic Republic where paid sex is anathema, court officials said Sunday.

Two of the eight have already been subjected to 70 and 170 lashes respectively, the officials told AFP, declining to give their names.

The others still have to face their sentences, which also included fines.

The footballers were caught after a raid on a Tehran whorehouse run by three women, two of them sisters, turned up incriminating photographs.

Prostitution has been firmly outlawed here since the 1979 Islamic revolution, although the economic woes of recent years have driven more and more young women to resort to selling their bodies.

Despite increased police checks on couples on buses and in public places, and raids on private parties, women can be seen openly soliciting on the streets of wealthy north Tehran.

The Iranian team narrowly missed making this year's World Cup in Japan and South Korea after being knocked out in their final qualifier against the Republic of Ireland.

Venables' Rio plan

Football

INTERNET

New Leeds manager Terry Venables has vowed to keep Rio Ferdinand and turn him into an Elland Road legend.

Ferdinand has been the subject of mounting speculation that he is poised to leave the Yorkshire club.

Manchester United and Arsenal have both been linked with the England central defender, who is valued at around £30m.

But Venables is determined to keep his most-valued asset and will meet Ferdinand for talks on Sunday after the player returns from holiday.

"Without a shadow of doubt I want to keep Rio Ferdinand," the former England manager told the News of the World newspaper.

"He's an outstanding centre-half and has a major role to play in our Leeds team."

"Rio has a contract and I think it's fair that contract is honoured - otherwise what's the point in having them?"

"Rio's still very young and there's still plenty of time for him to do other things but sometimes it's pay-back time."

"I believe if you spend a lot of money on someone, like Leeds did on Rio, then they are entitled to pay-back time."

When the pair meet up Venables will not be offering Ferdinand more

money to stay but will instead appeal to the defender's pride.

"Since 1974 we have won only one major trophy - we have to try to redress that balance as soon as possible"

"If a player joins a club that's constantly winning things, it's like latching onto someone else's achievements," said Venables.

"Rio has a chance here of being involved in something that's new, and that's far more exciting, shaping the entire future of this club."

"That's the way players become legends."

"I want Rio's name to always be associated with a great Leeds team and it's my job to make that happen."

Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale, meanwhile, has admitted he could lose his job if Venables does not bring success to Elland Road.

"I am chairman of a football club which is a public company, and there are two sets of people who will decide whether I am employed or not - the shareholders and the supporters."

"I am no more immune to being held accountable to our performances than anyone else in the game and whether Terry works out will affect my future," Ridsdale told the Sunday Express.

"Since 1974 we have won only one major trophy. For a club of this size, we have to try to redress that balance as soon as possible."



PHOTO: INTERNET

New Zealand's Ryan Nelson (R) is over the moon as he celebrates his winner against Australia at Sydney yesterday.

New Zealand rule Oceania

Football

INTERNET, Sydney

Australian football indulged in some deep soul-searching just hours after the shock 1-0 defeat by New Zealand in the Oceania Nations Cup in Auckland.

Ryan Nelson's winner for the Kiwis took them to next season's Confederations Cup in France, and dealt a hefty second sporting blow to their neighbours from across the Tasman Sea.

The Socceros defeat came just 24 hours after the All Blacks rugby union win over the Wallabies.

Australia, who missed out on a place in the World Cup finals in a play-off against Uruguay, will need to completely overhaul their game, according to the acting Soccer Australia chief executive Greg Bates.

Bates slammed Soccer Australia for a lack of planning, which sent a squad of home-based players to New Zealand completely unprepared.

He claimed Soccer Australia's precarious financial position placed coach Frank Farina in an embarrassing position.

Australia's participation in the tournament was in doubt until a few days before the tournament.

Overseas stars such as Leeds United pair Harry Kewell and Mark Viduka were told they would not be paid to fly back, and would only get expenses.

Despite Farina picking a third-string squad of home-based players, Australia was still expected to win the Oceania Nations Cup, and with it a potential money-spinning trip to France next year to play in Fifa's Confederations Cup.

Bates said: "Frank Farina was given mission impossible in New Zealand."

"If the administration is in disarray you cannot win on the field. You cannot."

Soccer Australia's finances were damaged when they were forced to reach an out-of-court settlement with former marketing partner International Entertainment Corporation.

The Australian federation meet on Friday and Bates called for drastic, sweeping changes, even at the cost of his own position.

"At that time, they will have to decide a number of things including whether they want me as Chief Executive Officer. I'm not confident of keeping the job, though."

"People have to accept responsibility about how we got to this position."

"It's not the team, it's not IEC, it's ourselves."

"Change is not so much about process or how you run a competition."

"It's about accepting responsibility. It's about trust. It's about openness and transparency."

"It's about a willingness to work with each other and not against each other."

"And a willingness to let a professional management get on with the job."

Washington DC-based Nelson volleyed home an Aaron Lines free-kick from close range to clinch victory.

Australia dominated the early stages and were denied a lead when New Zealand's veteran goalkeeper Jason Batty pulled off a brilliant 10th minute save to deny Joel Porter.

New Zealand rode out the pressure and finished the stronger of the two sides.

Despite scoring 23 goals in the run-up to the final, the Socceros rarely lived up to their reputation as Oceania's strongest football nation.

They needed a golden goal to beat lowly Tahiti in the semi-final of the eight-nation tournament.

Baggio signs two-year deal

INTERNET

Robert Baggio has signed a new two-year contract with Serie A club Brescia.

The Italian legend has scotched rumours that he would retire after missing out on a place in Italy's World Cup squad.

Instead, the 'Divine Ponytail' has his eyes fixed on joining a select club of five players who have scored 200 Serie A goals.

The former Inter and Juventus striker's tally currently stands at 181, more than any other player currently active in the top flight.

He underwent a knee operation last season which wrecked his hopes of appearing in his fourth World Cup finals.

Baggio said: "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."

"I hope to get 200 goals in Serie A as soon as possible," said Baggio who is hoping to join Giuseppe Altifina, Gunnar Nordahl, Giuseppe Meazza and Silvio Piola.

The only other Serie A players close to joining the 200 club are Roma's Argentine international Gabriel Batistuta with 178, and Bologna's Giuseppe Signori with 170.

Barca eyeing D'Alessandro

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona are trailing promising River Plate winger Andres D'Alessandro after their interest in Valencia star Kily Gonzalez cooled, a Spanish report said on Saturday.

Barcelona signed D'Alessandro's former team-mate Juan-Roman Riquelme for 11 million euros (10.9 million dollars) last week and are now keen on 21-



ANDRES D'ALESSANDRO

year-old D'Alessandro, who starred for the Under-21 side last year which won the world championship, according to Spanish paper El Mundo Deportivo.

D'Alessandro, a first-teamer for Argentine champions River Plate for the past three years, is out of contract at the end of June 2003 and wouldn't pose any work permit problems as he has an Italian passport.

If Barca do move for D'Alessandro that could signal the end to their proposed bid for Argentine international Gonzalez.