

Vieri hates Serie A!

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Italy and Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri says Italian football has become 'ugly' and believes that the English and Spanish leagues are now more entertaining.

The powerful striker also criticised Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni's cautious approach at the recent World Cup finals.

Italy were knocked out in the second round after a 'golden goal' defeat to co-hosts South Korea -- a result which follows three seasons of failure for Italian clubs in European competition.

'We need to change mentality -- that is the problem with everything here,' Vieri was quoted as saying in Tuesday's Gazzetta Dello Sport. 'Today in Italy we play badly, we produce ugly football.'

The Spanish and English cham-

pionships are more entertaining, more spectacular. Our football is behind in respect to the others.

'You can hear Italian coaches abroad say that as well.'

Vieri, whose four goals in South Korea and Japan made him his country's joint all-time top scorer in World Cup finals with a total of nine,



CHRISTIAN VIERI

said Italy had been too worried about their opponents.

'Notwithstanding everything that happened we should have gone forward in that tournament because we were much stronger,' he said.

'That is the truth that adds to the disappointment -- with the attackers we had we should have had more belief,' said Vieri, referring to Alessandro Del Piero, Filippo Inzaghi and Vincenzo Montella, who spent much of the tournament on the subs bench.

'Instead we thought too much about the opposition and that, in my opinion, was our problem.'

'Have you heard what Ronaldo said? We play with three or four attackers because we are Brazil -- it is the others who should be worried about us.'

'There you go, I would like to be able to say the same -- 'We are Italy'. If you think about the other team you are not strong.'

The Serie A season kicks off on September 1.

Riquelme loving it already

Football

INTERNET, Barcelona

Argentine midfielder Juan Roman Riquelme was presented as a Barcelona player on Monday after completing his move from Boca Juniors in a deal worth dollars 11.03 million.

'I just have to get used to the game here as soon as possible and then hopefully give the fans something to cheer about,' Riquelme said after arriving in the Catalan capital.

'With luck I'll be a champion at Barcelona. That's all I'm hoping for.'

Riquelme was welcomed at Barcelona's El Prat airport by a mass of cheering fans, many wearing Barcelona and Boca Juniors shirts.

'I was a little surprised by the welcome,' the 24-year-old admitted. 'I had no idea the people would care so much for me.'

Barcelona paid dollars 6.02 million for 50 percent of Riquelme's contract and have the option of paying a further dollars 5.01 million to buy him outright but the player's immediate Nou Camp future remains unclear.

The Catalan club already has four non-European Union players, the maximum allowed in Spain, and it has not ruled out putting its latest signing on loan for his first season.

Coach Louis van Gaal nevertheless sounded enthusiastic as he welcomed the player on Monday.



JUAN ROMAN RIQUELME

'I'm very happy,' said the Dutch coach. 'He's a player with a lot of talent. He'll have to work hard, though, as will everyone else here.'

Riquelme's move to Barcelona sees him follow in the footsteps of Diego Maradona, the Argentine great who played at the Nou Camp from 1982 to 1994.

Barcelona failed to win the league title during Maradona's spell at the club, though, and van Gaal is clearly expecting more from Riquelme.

'There have been a lot of comparisons between Riquelme and Maradona,' van Gaal said. 'People may remember, though, that Maradona didn't win much here. I do want to win things.'

'We have to give Riquelme and the rest of the players time and maybe in the end we will win something.'

Bora plans own burial!

Football

AFP, Beijing

China's perennially eccentric ex-football coach Bora Milutinovic has been touring Tibet after leading the country's team to its first World Cup -- and decided to return for a traditional 'sky burial'.

Milutinovic, who is vastly popular in China for taking the national team to the tournament, made this announcement as he toured Lhasa with his wife and daughter, the state Xinhua news agency said Tuesday.

At the end of the visit Milutinovic, who stepped down as national coach after China exited the World Cup in June, was asked when he would come back to Tibet.

'I do have a plan. Just before I leave this world, I will come back to

Tibet for a sky burial,' he said, referring to the Tibetan Buddhist practice of dismembering dead bodies and leaving them for birds of prey to pick clean.

The fame of the 57-year-old Yugoslav has even extended to the

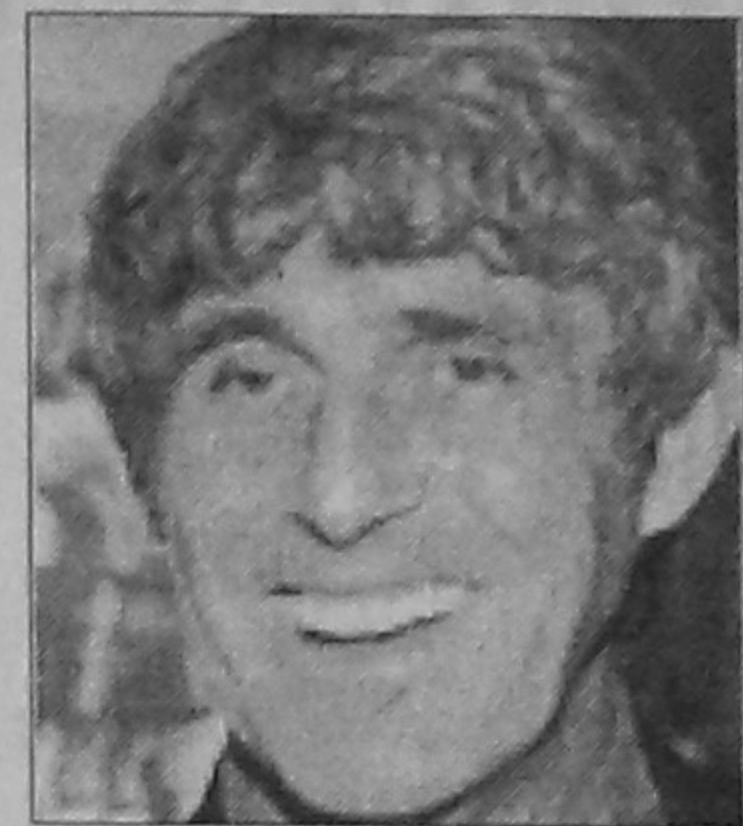
Himalayan territory occupied by China for more than half a century, Xinhua said, as he was accosted for autographs and even persuaded to show children some football moves.

Milutinovic said he had long wanted to visit Tibet.

'Personally for me, to be able to see Tibet with my own eyes makes me very happy. Lhasa is beautiful. Everything about Tibet left a very good impression on me, especially the Tibetan people,' he said.

Milutinovic led China to their first-ever World Cup finals, capturing the imagination of a country dulled by four decades of failed attempts to qualify.

However, once at the tournament in June, the inexperienced Chinese team performed no better than international pundits had expected, exiting in the first round after three losses, with no goals scored and nine conceded.



BORA MILUTINOVIC

Leeds won't sell Rio

Football

INTERNET, Leeds

Premiership contenders Leeds United will reject any transfer demand from Rio Ferdinand.

The player is considering his future after Manchester United expressed an interest in taking him to Old Trafford in a deal thought to be worth more than £30m.

Ferdinand says he will make a decision soon - but Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale insists the club have no intention of letting him go.

'As far as I am concerned Rio Ferdinand is going nowhere and I find all this talk about him leaving quite amusing considering that we haven't had a bid for him.'

'I have no reason to doubt that Rio wants to stay at Leeds United.'

'He has not indicated that he wants to leave and, while it is purely hypothetical, if he were to hand in a transfer request it would be firmly rejected by the board.'

The England centre-half met club coach Terry Venables on Sunday after returning from a short break in Nice.

Ferdinand emerged from that meeting stressing that he was faced with 'a huge dilemma' and had 'the toughest decision' of his life ahead of him, but it seems increasingly likely that the 23-year-old will take his first step towards following Lee Bowyer out of Elland Road by telling Leeds officials he wants to leave.

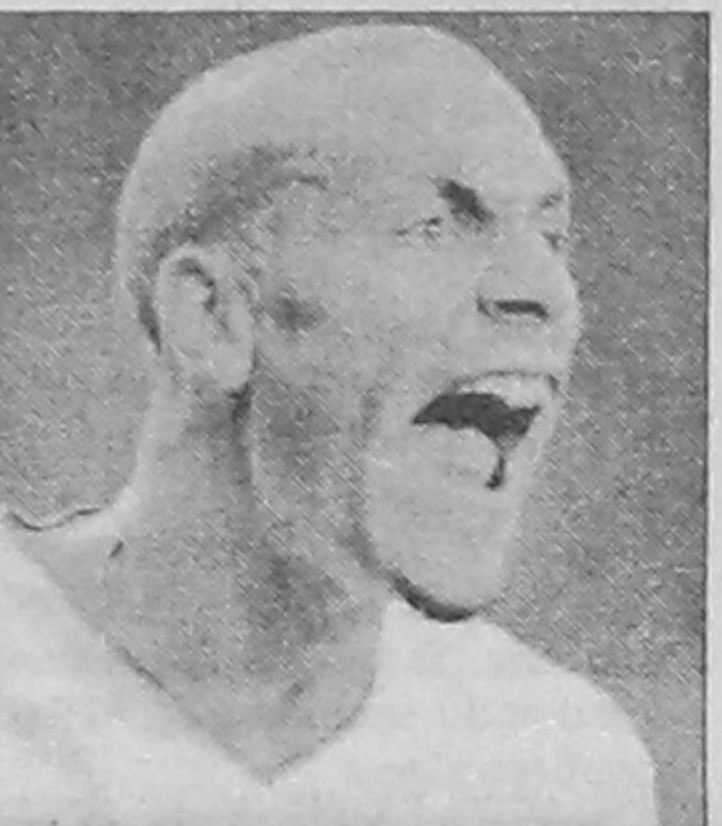
Though Sir Alex Ferguson has yet to table a bid for his chief summer transfer target, sources close to Ferdinand confirmed last night that the former West Ham defender's heart is set upon moving to Old Trafford. While the meeting with Venables was constructive - 'I feel Leeds will achieve things with him in charge,' said Ferdinand - it did not do enough to change the defender's mind.

It may only be 20 months since Leeds paid £18m for his services, but his barnstorming displays at the World Cup whetted Ferdinand's

appetite with the desire for silverware and Champions League football.

The centre-half currently earns £30,000 a week at Elland Road and has four years remaining on his contract, but would be prepared to forgo a £1m loyalty bonus to move over the Pennines, where he should be able to double his wages.

A fee in the region of £30m would at least relieve the financial pressures on Leeds, though that would be scant consolation for their fans at the sight of their talismanic captain



RIO FERDINAND

leaving for their archrivals. A potential move for Valencia's Roberto Ayala, ironically another target for Manchester United, as a replacement would do little to appease them.

Ferdinand should be allowed to leave Elland Road if he no longer wants to play for Leeds, feels supporters club chairman Ray Fell.

Fell is anxious for Ferdinand to come out and say he is happy to remain at Leeds as the defender mulls over whether or not to ask for a move to United.

However, if the England international decides he does not want to stay, then Fell claims Leeds should let him go because he only wants players who are 100% committed to the club.

'At the end of the day if a player wants to go then we should say 'off you go' because I only want players

who want to play for Leeds,' he said.

'Centre-halves aren't always as hard to replace as other key positions and we've got some good talent at Elland Road and we already have some good centre-halves.'

'Nonetheless the fans would be more than happy if he did stay.'

Fell claims the supporters are growing tired of the whole 'will he, won't he' saga and he fears the omens are that he will ask to leave.

'It's been dragging on now for a good month and the fans are perplexed by the whole thing,' he said.

'There haven't even been any negotiations between the clubs.'

'It's frustrating because even though Leeds keep saying he's not for sale, the whole thing just keeps going on and on in the media.'

'It seems he went to the World Cup a happy Leeds player and came home a dissatisfied one.'

'The way things are dragging on, I'm a little bit less confident of him staying, but it's still in the lap of the gods and we'll just have to bat it out.'

Ferdinand, 23, still has four years left on the contract he signed when Leeds made him the world's most expensive defender by splashing out £18m in November 2000.

The exodus from Elland Road should already be underway by the time Ferdinand tells the chairman Peter Ridsdale of his decision, with Bowyer edging closer to completing his protracted £9m transfer to Anfield. The 25-year-old former Charlton midfielder spent yesterday discussing personal terms and undergoing a medical at Liverpool's Melwood training complex.

Though negotiations took longer than expected - 'The position at the moment is that talks with the player are still ongoing,' confirmed a spokesman last night - Gerard Houllier will resume talks today in an attempt to complete the deal before Liverpool leave for a pre-season tour of France. All being well, the controversial midfielder should then make his debut in Friday's friendly against Le Havre.

Diouf now Liverpool's

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Senegal striker El-Hadji Diouf has signed a five-year deal with Liverpool, the English premier league club has said.

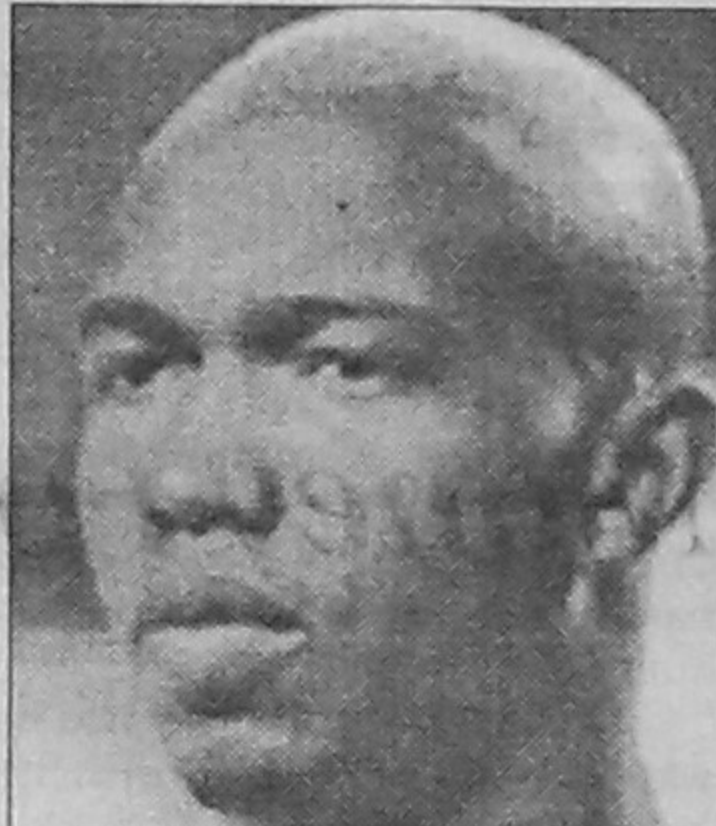
'We can confirm that Diouf has signed a five-year deal that will keep him at Anfield until June 2007,' a club spokesman said.

The club wanted to tie-up the deal with the 21-year-old's former club Lens before the end of the World Cup, suspecting that his price might go through the roof after a successful tournament.

Diouf, who made the World Cup All-Star team after helping Senegal progress to the quarter-finals, met his new team-mates at Melwood for his first training session Tuesday morning.

Currently Africa's Footballer of the Year Diouf has cost Liverpool 10 million pounds. He was joined in training by fellow newcomers Alou Diarra and Bruno Cheyrou, who have both signed long-term deals at Anfield.

French midfielder Diarra, 21, arrived on a free transfer from



EL-HADJI DIOUF

Bayern Munich, while 24-year-old Cheyrou joined for four million pounds to Lille last week.

Salif Diao, who played alongside Diouf at this year's World Cup, has also signed a five-year contract from Sedan.

But the midfielder, who cost Liverpool some 5 million pounds, will not arrive in England until December.

Senegal were one of the surprises of the tournament in South Korea and Japan when they beat defending world champions France in the opening game and went on to the quarter-finals.

CONCACAF wants more

Football

INTERNET

Jack Warner, the president of the CONCACAF, on Monday called for the region to receive a fourth berth into the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

CONCACAF is a regional governing body that represents North America and the Caribbean. Warner, who is also a vice president of FIFA, soccer's world governing body, stated CONCACAF deserved the additional place following the success of the United States, Mexico and Costa Rica at the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan.

'I have let it be known, at all the levels that count, that we shall make every possible effort to obtain a fourth place for CONCACAF in the World Cup of 2006,' said Warner.

'It is only right and proper that we should be able to send our best four because who in the world can argue that our best three did not stand up to the best of the other con-

federations have to offer? 'And who can argue that our best four could not do the same?'

The U.S. carried the CONCACAF banner the furthest in South Korea and Japan, reaching the quarter-finals for the first time since 1930 where they were beaten 1-0 by Germany.

Mexico also surprised by finishing top of Group G, ahead of three-times World Cup winners Italy and

Croatia, who finished third in 1998.

Costa Rica failed to qualify for the second phase after losing out on goal difference to Turkey, who were beaten by eventual winners Brazil in the semi-finals.

With the holders no longer automatically qualifying for the 2006 finals, FIFA's member confederations are all expected to engage in intense lobbying for the coveted berth.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has also hinted at a redistribution of the 32 places.

Asia, which threatened to pull out of the 2002 World Cup if it did not receive an additional spot, currently has four and a half, which includes a playoff berth, and is seeking five.

Ireland beat Iran in the playoffs to deny Asia a fifth representative at last month's tournament.

Oceania has also been seeking an automatic berth rather than having to play off for a place in the finals.

The African Confederation also feels it deserves an additional place given the rapid growth of the sport in the continent.



JACK WARNER

Kluivert sings for Rivaldo

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona's Patrick Kluivert is calling on the club to keep his forward partner Rivaldo as they look to avoid a third season without a trophy.

Rivaldo, who scored five goals in Brazil's successful World Cup campaign, is out of contract at the end of the 2002-03 season and while the player insists he wants to stay the Catalan club are mulling over their options.

Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti said last week he would like to sign Rivaldo as part of a swap deal with Spanish international Gaizka Mendietta and there has been renewed speculation in Spain that such a move could take place.

'People are talking about Rivaldo leaving but he's a Barcelona player and I hope he's going to stay,' Kluivert told a news conference after training at Barcelona on Tuesday.

'We all know that he can decide a game in one moment. It's important for us to have a player like him in the

squad.'

Barcelona have not won a major title since 1999, when the club won the second of two league championships under Louis van Gaal.

The Dutch coach is now back at the Nou Camp and Kluivert is hoping for a return to winning ways.

'The public are right,' he said. 'A club like Barcelona can't go three years without winning anything. We have to do something great this season.'

'Van Gaal is the same coach he always has been but even more keen to win things this time round.'

Kluivert trained alongside the club's new Argentine midfielder Juan Roman Riquelme on Tuesday.

'He's a great person as well as a great player,' Kluivert said. 'I've seen him play before and I don't think he'll have any problems adapting to Spanish football.'



PATRICK KLUIVERT

Juninho talks resurface

Football

INTERNET, Middlesbrough

English Premiership strugglers Middlesbrough are continuing their battle to bring a little slice of Brazil's World Cup success story back to home shores.

The extravagant north east club yesterday confirmed they had upped their offer to bring the club's not-so prodigal son, Juninho, back to the Riverside for a third term.

'We are hopeful that both parties can eventually agree a deal to bring Juninho back to Middlesbrough,' said a club spokesman. The £4.5 million transfer seemed to be dead in the water after personal terms could not be agreed.

The diminutive midfielder's agent, his father Osvaldo Giroldo, was quoted in Thursday's Middlesbrough Evening Gazette: 'We have had friendly discussions but we will not be making a deal. I came here for talks but there has been no deal. The offer they have made is not what we wanted and I will be returning to Brazil.'

The 27-year-old Atletico Madrid player spent last season on loan with Flamengo in his native Brazil but his performances for the Selecao recently have once again made him flavour of the month in Europe's shop window.

They [Middlesbrough] have certain limits and Juninho didn't fit into it. I have spoken to Atletico and they want Juninho to come back to play for them,' concluded Giroldo.

Juninho first joined Boro from Sao Paulo in November 1995 as part of Brian Robson's cashed-up



JUNINHO

Teesside revolution. With the likes of prolific former FC Juventus striker Fabrizio Ravanelli and flamboyant compatriot Emerson, Juninho gave the newly promoted club a dazzling dimension the likes of which it had never seen before.

The fatal flaw in Robson's strategy was the massive imbalance that tilted the side. Moments of sublime play from the genuine stars were tempered by standard blunders by lesser names who played in the shadows of their illustrious teammates.

Despite making it to a couple of final appearances Boro's challenge began to list and Juninho left the sinking ship for Spain in 1997, when the club were relegated, only to rejoin them on loan in 1999.

But Middlesbrough's passionate fans have kept a soft spot in their hearts for the idolised South American, and with Italy Under-21s star Massimo Maccaroni already signed for a record £8 million they sense a return to the heady days of the mid-nineties.

Sergio, from Bayern to al-Wahda

REUTERS, Dubai

Bayern Munich's Brazil midfielder Paulo Sergio has signed a two-year contract with Abu Dhabi's al-Wahda club.

'I have heard a lot about the (United Arab) Emirates and I really liked the place when I first came here to negotiate the contract with al-Wahda two months ago,' Paulo Sergio told a news conference.

'I am now focused on my football for my new club,' added the 33-year-old, a member of Brazil's 1994 World Cup-winning squad.

Bayern had said in May that they would release Paulo Sergio as they sought to rebuild their squad.

Paulo Sergio, who will earn £400,000 per year with his new club, is expected to play alongside al-Wahda's Qatar striker Mohammed Salem al-Enazi, the Emirates' league's leading scorer last season.

'I met Enazi when he came for a trial with Bayern Munich and we have had a very good relationship since then. I am hopeful we can strike up a good partnership in the new season,' Paulo Sergio said.

'I want to do well in my first season in the Gulf. I am fortunate to have joined a leading club in the country and, hopefully, be a part of a winning team.'

Paulo Sergio has over 50 Brazil caps, has won the Champions League with Bayern and the German domestic league twice. He has also played in Germany for Bayer Leverkusen and in Italy for AS Roma.

Onopko close to Deportivo switch

Football

INTERNET

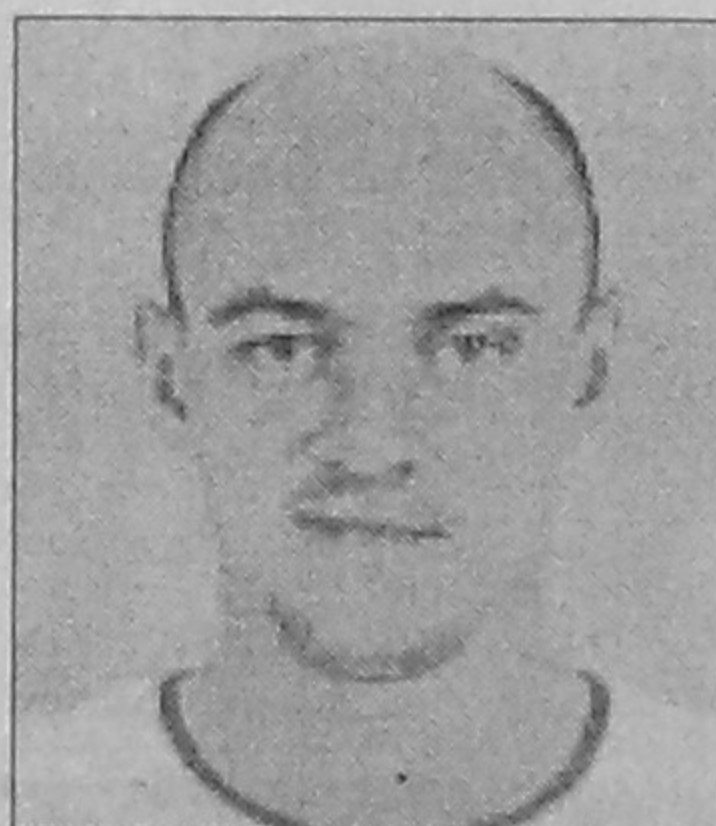
Russian international Victor Onopko is on the verge of completing a move from relegated Real Oviedo to Deportivo La Coruna of the Primera Division.

The two Spanish clubs agreed a fee for the 33-year-old defender at a meeting in Madrid and the player should move to the Riazor Stadium later this week.

Onopko has won over 100 caps for his country and Depor coach Javier Irureta is keen to add the veteran's experience to his squad as the prepare to mount a challenge in this year's UEFA Champions League.

'My hopes are almost complete,' said Irureta. 'He is a player who has experience and can contribute many things.'

Onopko is keen for a move away



VICTOR ONOPKO

from cash strapped second division side Oviedo and is willing to forego around £1m in wages for a move to the Blanquiazules.

'I want to play for Deportivo, I don't know how to convince them, but if need be, I'll go there to talk to the President and the coach,' the desperate stopper said last month.

Japan may meet Argentina

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Japan are hoping to play Argentina in a friendly on November 20 at Tokyo's National Stadium, the Japanese Football Association said

Tuesday.

It could be Japan's first international under former Brazil star Zico, who is expected to be appointed the national coach on Saturday.

Zico will replace Frenchman Philippe Troussier who piloted co-hosts Japan into the World Cup second round last month.

Maldini might wait

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Italy captain Paolo Maldini will consider coach Giovanni Trapattoni's request for him to postpone his retirement from the national side, the defender said.

Italy's most capped player with 126 appearances, the AC Milan player has said on several occasions he intended to quit the 'Azzurri' after the World Cup finals that ended on June 30.

Italy were knocked out in the second round by South Korea and Trapattoni has since asked Maldini to stay on for at least part of the European Championship qualification campaign.

'My decision doesn't depend upon the result of the match

between South Korea and Italy,' Maldini told his club's television station Milan Channel.

'I had already taken it some months before. But I was pleased with the phone call I received a few days ago from Trapattoni who wanted to confirm his confidence in



PAOLO MALDINI

me.'

'The coach advised me to wait before officialising my farewell to international football. And as there's no hurry, I think I'll follow his advice. I'll make a final statement about my decision in twenty days.'

'I am still inclined to stay with the decision I took some months ago but I will wait before making the official announcement,' said Maldini.

Trapattoni said if Maldini stayed on for another year it would give him time to try and find a young replacement for the man who has been Italy's left back since the late 1980's.

Italy begin their European qualification campaign in Baku against Azerbaijan on September 7 and also face Yugoslavia, Wales and Finland in group play.

Before then Trapattoni will have a chance to test out his side in a friendly against Slovenia in Trieste on August 21.

Vampeta's threat!

Football

INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's World Cup winning midfielder Vampeta revealed Monday he had deliberately underperformed for ailing giants Flamengo last season because he had not been paid.

Vampeta, who is now on loan to Corinthians, could be sued by Flamengo's former president Edmundo Santos Silva for damages and losses after the team finished in a humiliating 24th place - one off relegation.

However Vampeta claimed he was justified as he felt if he was not

being paid then he didn't need to perform.

'The Flamengo president pretended to pay me and I pretended to play,' he said.

'The team simply didn't perform because we didn't receive our wages,' he added.

For his part Silva, who was relieved of his post last week and is under investigation for fraud, said he would be looking into Vampeta's performances last season to see if he could sue him.