

Almeyda signs up for pay-cut

INTERNET, Milan

Internazionale's new signing Matias Almeyda has decided to join three of the club's big stars in taking a pay reduction. Christian Vieri, Ronaldo and Alvaro Recoba all agreed to reduce their salaries by 5 to 10% in a personal gesture to club president Massimo Moratti, but all will still earn over £4 million.

Ambitious Argentinean midfielder Almeyda has decided to follow his colleagues' example in a bid to land more silverware in cash strapped Serie A.

"They made an important gesture," said the 28-year-old Almeyda who joins Milan on a three-year deal from Parma.

"To join Inter I decided to accept a lower wage if compared to that I was getting at Parma. This should prove I really cared to come here," Almeyda said.

"Anyway, now I'm very happy and I hope to win with this jersey as many trophies as possible."

The Argentine international won the Scudetto with SS Lazio two years ago and has a three year contract with Inter, who reached the semi-final of the UEFA Cup last season and won the league title in 1989.

Almeyda, who moved to Italy in 1997 from Spanish club Sevilla, went close several times in the past to signing for Inter and rejected offers from French club PSG and Turkey's Galatasaray to join the Milan club.

His arrival, in a swap deal involving Vratislav Gresko, means Portugal's Sergio Conceicao is now free to move.

Real's unwanted seven

REUTERS, Madrid

European champions Real Madrid are looking to cut seven players from their first team squad before the start of the new season, the club's sporting director Jorge Valdano has said.

"At the moment we've got 32 players in the squad and we can only register 25," Valdano said at a news conference after the first training session of the pre-season.

"That means that if we can't find exits for seven players they'll be left unable to play."

"It's not a nice situation because it's difficult for players to leave. Everyone wants to make a contribution."

Real have made no new signings over the close season but they plan to promote forward Javier Portillo and defenders Raul Bravo and Oscar Minambres from the B team, while midfielders Esteban Cambiasso and Fernando have been recalled from loan spells.

"Signing players is not the priority, although we are looking at the market," Valdano said.

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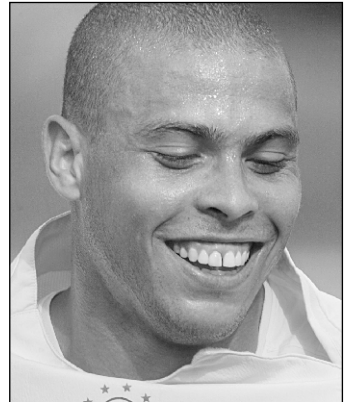
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Argentina love him too!

INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Superstar Ronaldo is honoured world-wide. Now even the greatest rival in Brazilian football has given up in front of Ronaldo's talent.

The TV program "Simplemente Fútbol" aired on ESPN International and presented by Argentinean Quique Wolff has done an extensive reportage about Ronaldo's career.



RONALDO

Wolff is one of the harshest critics of Brazil.

The reportage covers Ronaldo's exploits with Cruzeiro, with PSV Eindhoven, with Barcelona and then Inter. He has scored in any possible way, beautiful goals that only real champions can make.

Just goes to prove Ronaldo is a Fenomeno for Argentineans as he is for all the fans of football.

Money not talking

Football

INTERNET, London

Football's multi-million dollar stars are returning to pre-season training with recession eating away at Europe's biggest clubs.

The bottom has fallen out of the transfer market as clubs put a hold on investment and try to cut mounting debts. And players are feeling the pinch as executives examine inflated pay packets.

Brazil's World Cup hero Ronaldo, the game's hottest property, has agreed to take a 10 percent pay cut at Inter Milan along with Italian forward Christian Vieri and Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba, to help the club's cash flow and improve the public image of players often branded by fans as greedy and disloyal.

"If a club can't pay the players, then we need to be honest and accept a pay cut for the good of everybody," Recoba, reportedly Italy's highest-paid player with annual wages of almost dollars 8 million, told Inter's Web site.

Traditionally, Italy's Serie A has attracted the world's biggest stars by paying the highest wages and splashing out the most extravagant transfer fees.

But with even a giant like Inter concerned to trim the payroll, it is hardly surprising that the normally hectic pre-season transfer market has fallen virtually silent, with many clubs content to swap players rather than invest in squad-strengthening.

Elsewhere in Italian football the fallout of financial crisis has been felt even harder.

Fiorentina, formerly a Champions League qualifier and perennial title contender, crashed into Serie B last season after being forced to sell star players like goalkeeper Francesco Toldo and Portuguese playmaker Rui Costa and only narrowly averting bankruptcy after years of heavy borrowing against non-existent revenue.

And with clubs now being told to prove they have the resources to complete the forthcoming campaign, Roma president Franco Sensi says the season may have to be postponed by a month while Italian football gets its finances in order.

Even European champions Real Madrid, who have broken the world transfer record for each of the past two years to attract Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane to the Bernabeu and who spent more than dollars 60 million before the start of last season, have shown no interest in adding to their collection of super-stars.

"The club's policy is to bring in genuine stars and there aren't many of them about," club president Florentino Perez, who once boasted about signing a new superstar every summer, told Spain's Marca newspaper.

But Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger was perhaps more honest when he spoke to reporters at a press conference to announce the signing of Lille defender Pascal Cygan for a modest dollars 2.1 million, the English champions' only outlay ahead of the new season.

"We all thought the car was going into the wall and the accident was about to happen -- but the car has already hit the wall," Wenger said. "At the moment we are in a depression. I put that down to a disastrous financial situation in football in Europe." After a decade in which football's bubble has been swelled by stock market flotations and huge sums generated by the auction of television rights, the collapse of the financial markets and evidence that television coverage has reached saturation point have hit the sport hard.

Having spent recent years competing to throw money to clubs, the broadcasting companies, stung by the failure of pay-per-view experiments and falling viewing figures, are now cooperating to force the cost of rights downwards.

Germany's Bundesliga clubs have renegotiated a deal with Kirch for US dollars 250 million less than the US dollars 940 million the broadcaster was originally ready to pay.

With many of England's lower league clubs facing possible extinction, the Football League was forced to accept a £149 million (dollars 210 million) deal from Rupert Murdoch's Sky after the bankrupt ITV Digital defaulted on a contract that had

Elber foresees great things

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Brazilian striker Elber expects the former European and German champions to return to winning ways next season but feels Borussia Dortmund and Schalke 04 remain the teams to beat.

"At the end of next season I hope we'll be celebrating with our fans on the Marienplatz (Munich's central square), preferably having won the treble," Elber said in an interview with the club's website (www.fcbayern.t-online.de).

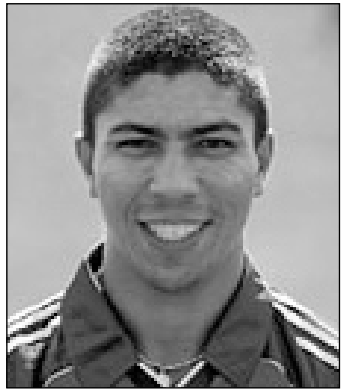
"We want to be champions this season and with the team we have at the moment, our chances in the Champions League aren't bad either," said Elber, who starts his sixth season at Bayern Munich after three at VfB Stuttgart.

Bayern failed to win any silverware last season for the first time since 1995, finishing third in the Bundesliga and losing in the Champions League at the quarter-final stage to eventual winners Real Madrid.

Elber said champions Dortmund

and Schalke would prove the toughest to beat but did not write off Bayer Leverkusen, last season's eternal runners-up after reaching the finals of the Champions League and German Cup and who were just pipped by Dortmund to the championship.

"I wouldn't put a cent on Leverkusen. But who knows, last season no one thought they had a chance and they nearly won three titles. Football is full of surprises," said Elber, who is under contract at Bayern until 2004.



ELBER

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Houllier ready to spend

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier is ready to bring more new faces to Anfield before the start of the English premier league season.

The Merseyside club -- who finished runners-up in the last campaign -- have already spent heavily in the close season on Bruno Cheyrou, Alou Diarra and El-Hadji Diouf, while Lee Bowyer is set to complete a move from Leeds United this week.

Houllier is pleased with his transfer dealings so far -- which have totalled about 14 million pounds -- but claims his spending is not finished yet.

He told the Liverpool website: "It is good to be back. We have been busy in the summer and I am quite happy with the business we have done, but it is not finished yet."

"When I am looking for players my priorities are always talent, work-rate and team spirit. I believe I have found players who match those requirements."

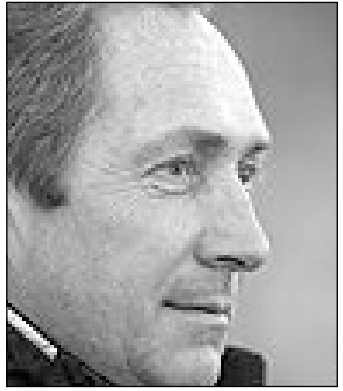
"I have been busy but a number of clubs have brought in three or four players and there will be more signings before the season starts."

Blackburn Rovers winger Damien Duff is one player Houllier is known to be keen on and the Ireland international is due to have talks with his club later this week.

If he fails to sign a new contract at Ewood Park, Blackburn will listen to offers of about 20 million pounds for the 23-year-old.

Houllier has also been talking about the qualities his new acquisitions will bring to his squad in the coming season.

He added: "Cheyrou is a left-sided player. He will need to get used to the English game and sometimes that can take weeks or even months, as Robert Pires showed. But he is a very gifted



GERARD HOULLIER

player who can play in several positions.

"El Hadji Diouf comes in for Nicolas Anelka because I have always said I want four or five strikers and we have five now.

"He not only has the skill, but also the will to be a Liverpool player."

Houllier can also call on the services of German defender Markus Babel, who has returned to full training after missing most of last season suffering with Guillain-Barre syndrome -- a muscle-numbing condition that attacks the nervous system.

Babel, who last played for Liverpool on August 27, says he feels like a new signing and can't wait for the season to start.

"It's nice to be back in training again and I'm pleased to say I feel fine. Everyone at the club was happy to see me back and it feels as though I am a new signing."

"We have all started at the same level and now we'll have to see who plays when the season starts. The last time I played a full season with Liverpool we won lots of trophies. Hopefully that will be the case again this year."

Babel was a member of the Liverpool side that won a treble of UEFA, FA and League cups in the 2000/2001 season.

Faith kept with Trap

Football

AP, Rome

The Italian Soccer Federation gave approval Tuesday for Giovanni Trapattoni to remain coach of Italy's national team.

The move had been expected despite Italy's poor performance at the World Cup. Most media members and fans of the Azzurri believe their team's early exit came at the hands of biased officiating rather than inadequate coaching.

World Cup co-host South Korea eliminated Italy 2-1 June 18 on a golden goal in the round of 16.

Trapattoni was Italy's most successful club coach before taking over the national team job when Dino Zoff resigned abruptly after the European Championships in 2000.

At the federation's headquarters, soccer officials were also discussing the possibility of linking a portion of players' contracts to performance-based criteria, as well as a host of other issues that have cast a black eye on soccer in Italy.

The proposition to set aside 20 percent of players' salaries to be based on success attained on the pitch was made to address the poor economic status of the country's richest clubs.

On Saturday, Inter Milan's top international stars -- Ronaldo, Christian Vieri and Alvaro Recoba -- announced that they had decided to

cut their salaries in acknowledgment of tight financial times faced by their club.

The possibility of delaying the September 1 start of the upcoming Serie A season has also been proposed, to give clubs more time to bolster their payrolls.

"I think that the start of the season will be delayed by a month," AS Roma President Franco Sensi said Tuesday, according to the news agency ANSA. "The season probably will begin October 1."

The topic of non-European players in Italy's top two leagues was also on the agenda, ahead of the enactment of a new Italian immigration law that could affect the number of non-European players each team can employ.

The meetings were to continue Wednesday.



GIOVANNI TRAPATTONI

Pires hopes of early return

Football

REUTERS, London

French midfielder Robert Pires has said he could be back in action for Arsenal by the end of September.

Pires, who was voted Footballer of the Year last season by the Football Writers Association, suffered a cruciate knee ligament injury in March and was originally ruled out until the end of October.

"It has all gone very well and I could not be happier," the 29-year-old France international told Wednesday's Evening Standard.

Pires had surgery in May and has been recuperating at a sports injury clinic in the south of France.

"The treatment I have been getting is first-class and I should be back about three weeks before the original estimate," he said.

Pires enjoyed an outstanding season before he was injured in an FA Cup quarter-final against Newcastle United at Highbury and was forced to sit out the World Cup finals.

The new campaign gets under way in August and Pires's team mates Giovanni van Bronckhorst, who has a similar injury, and Freddie Ljungberg, who has a hip problem, will also be unavailable to manager Arsene Wenger.

Wenger told the paper he is determined to hold on to English striker Francis Jeffers, who had a disappointing first season following his eight million pound move from Everton last year.

"He is very much in my plans," said the Frenchman. "He was unlucky with injuries last season, but he had an operation to cure an ankle problem at the end of the season and seems fine now."



ROBERT PIRES

Feyenoord chase "Next Rivaldo"

Football

INTERNET

Feyenoord are on the verge of signing a player they have described as the "next Rivaldo".

Universidad de Chile youngster Sebastian Pardo has caught the eye of the Dutch club and is set to arrive on a season-long loan deal, with a permanent move in the offing.

The 21-year-old attacking midfielder is viewed as one of the brightest prospects in South America. Feyenoord's technical

director Rob Baan said: "If he continues to improve and develops physically, we could have the next Rivaldo in around three years."

Feyenoord are also reportedly interested in Chilean striker Mauricio Pinilla, according to reports in Chile. The Rotterdam giants will look to bring the 18-year-old to the club in December with an aim to introduce him into the squad for season 2003/2004. Pinilla is considered a major talent in Chilean football and Feyenoord were first introduced to him through videotape footage of his best performances.

Rustu interests Everton

Football

INTERNET, London

Everton have extended their search for a new goalkeeper by opening preliminary talks with Fenerbahce for the Turkish international Rustu Recber, having grown frustrated with Derby County's £7m valuation of Mart Poom.

Rustu, who played a major part in Turkey's third-place finish at this summer's World Cup, has a year remaining on his contract in Istanbul but Fenerbahce are anxious to cash in on him and would accept a deal amounting to around £5m. Everton are hoping to agree on an initial down payment with the rest of the fee to be paid in instalments.

With negotiations ongoing while Everton continue their pre-season



RUSTU RECBER

preparations in Austria, Moyes yesterday dispatched his goalkeeping coach Chris Woods to France to watch Bohemians Prague's Kamil Cotofalsky at last night's friendly against Le Havre. The 24-year-old Slovakian represents a cheaper - if less well known - option should a deal for Rustu founder.

New French coach on Friday

Football

REUTERS, Paris

The successor to Roger Lemerre as France's national coach should be named on Friday, French Soccer Federation sources confirmed as FFF president Claude Simonet began interviewing the four candidates.

Rene Girard, former assistant to Lemerre who was sacked after the defending champions suffered a humiliating World Cup first round exit, was the first to press his claims.

"I worked for Roger Lemerre for four years. I'm in favour of continuity because it would save time," the 48-year old former international midfielder said as he left Federation headquarters.

"I don't have a magic wand to change everything in the house and, anyway, I'm not sure we have to throw everything away," he added.

Raymond Domenech, who followed Girard into Simonet's office, said he was confident he could handle the job because he had acquired, as the under-21 selector, "a knowledge of all the players eligible right now and for the years to come."

"I have trained them all as youngsters," he said.

Domenech has been coaching the under-21 team since 1993. Zinedine Zidane and Christophe Dugarry were among the first players he selected and he has since brought through such as Thierry Henry, David Trezeguet and Mikael Silvestre.

The other two candidates being interviewed later in the day are Jacques Santini, manager of French champions Olympique Lyon, and Philippe Troussier, who guided co-hosts Japan to the last 16 of the World Cup.

Rio rejected

Football

REUTERS, Leeds

Ferdinand, who joined Leeds from West Ham United for 18 million pounds in November 2000, had talks with new Leeds manager Terry Venables on Sunday.

His decision to submit a transfer request is thought to be designed to pave a way for a move to Old Trafford.

United manager Alex Ferguson has made public his desire to secure Ferdinand's services, but the Manchester club's next move is awaited with interest.

The onus is now on United to table a formal bid that Leeds, who are heavily in debt, would find impossible to resist.

Ridsdale has been angered by the continuing speculation over Ferdinand's future, and has maintained in recent days that Leeds's prize asset is going nowhere.

He added on Wednesday: "No bid worthy of consideration has been received from any football club for Rio."

"Rio has four years remaining on his current contract and I expect him to respect that contractual obligation."

Leeds United have rejected an official transfer request from Rio Ferdinand, as the wrangle over the England defender's future intensifies.

"I can confirm that Rio Ferdinand has asked for a transfer," Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale said in a statement on Wednesday.

"This request has been rejected."

Ferdinand, the 30 million pounds-rated player wanted by Leeds' premier league rivals Manchester United, said the decision to ask for a transfer had been agonising.

"I have been torn apart over the last three days," the 23-year-old was quoted as saying by Sky Sports television.

"I love Leeds United and the people...they took a huge gamble in signing me and I will never forget that."

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Metsu is history

Football

REUTERS, Dakar

Senegal's French coach Bruno Metsu has left for good after signing a 10-month contract with United Arab Emirates club Al-Ain last week, the head of the country's football federation has said.

Senegalese media reported that Metsu, dubbed the "White Magician" after taking the side to the World Cup quarter-finals at their first attempt, planned to take the 10 months as leave and return to Senegal after the Al-Ain contract expired.

But El Hadj Malik Sy, head of Senegal's Football Federation, told reporters: "There is no leave in the world of football. For us this is the end of a contract and we will work on finding a replacement (for Metsu)."

Sy said deputy coach Abdoulaye Sarr and his colleague Jules Francois Bocande would take charge of the national side until a replacement was found.

Under Metsu, Senegal shocked defending champions France by beating them 1-0 in the opening match at the World Cup finals in Seoul, South Korea before progressing to the last eight where they lost 1-0 to eventual third-place playoff winners Turkey.



BRUNO METSU