

Rivaldo's fire for fire

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Rivaldo has hit back at accusations by Barcelona coach Louis van Gaal that a lack of commitment was the reason behind the Catalan club's decision to release the Brazilian international from his contract.

The 30-year-old forward claimed that the van Gaal, who in his previous post as the Dutch national coach failed to steer his side to qualification for the World Cup, was jealous of his success at this summer's tournament in South Korea and Japan.

"He is envious because I won a tournament (the World Cup) that he couldn't even qualify for," Rivaldo said on his personal website on Wednesday.

"I feel sorry for van Gaal and understand why he is so angry. With all the stars in the Dutch team he wasn't even capable of guiding them towards qualification for the World Cup."

Earlier on Wednesday the Dutch coach denied that he had anything personal against Rivaldo, but said that a request from the player to extend his holidays had triggered the decision to annul his contract a year before it was due to expire.

"I liked Rivaldo when he was committed and motivated," said van Gaal speaking from the club's pre-season training base in Switzerland.

"But after he asked for two more weeks' holiday this weekend knowing full well that we have to play a Champions League qualifier he showed that he did not have the necessary commitment to Barcelona.

"Winning the World Cup was a great achievement for Rivaldo, but

he has to remember that it was the club that was paying him and the club must come first," he said. Van Gaal also claimed that Rivaldo appeared to show more determination and commitment when he played for Brazil than for Barcelona.

"His level dropped more for Barca than for Brazil," he said. "When you saw Rivaldo play for



RIVALDO

Brazil you saw an enthusiastic player, who wanted to work for his team. That is the difference."

Van Gaal, who was first in charge at the Nou Camp from 1997-2000, said that he had detected a change in attitude from the player after he won the World and European Player of the Year awards in 1999.

"I liked Rivaldo before he was chosen as the world's best player but since then he has not performed as well," he said.

"I wanted that Rivaldo because he was the best, but from that time on he didn't deal with either his personal or sporting situation in the right manner."

Van Gaal had a high profile run-in with Rivaldo in December 1999 - the

same month in which he was given the two prestigious awards - when the Brazilian demanded to play in the centre of the pitch rather than out on the left wing.

The Dutchman won that test of strength and Rivaldo was forced to apologise for his comments after sitting out two games but relations between the two suffered irrevocable damage.

Rivaldo responded in kind to the criticisms from his former coach that he had changed attitude after being given the international awards.

"I would also like to see the van Gaal before I won those awards - the one that was European champion (as Ajax coach) and won various league titles and not the one that was unable to lead the Netherlands to qualification.

"Honestly, it makes me sad that he has tried to undermine me like this," he added.

The player, who is negotiating a possible move to Italian club AC Milan, said he would give his version of his departure in the near future.

"I am on holiday at the moment and I can't give a press conference but I promise to do so as soon as I have had a rest," he said.

Meanwhile AC Milan general director Arieto Braida, flew to Brazil with Italian FIFA agent Ernesto Bronzetti on Wednesday to meet Rivaldo and convince him to sign for the Italian side.

According to rumours Milan are set to offer Rivaldo about 5 million euros a season for three years. The trip made to Brazil could be decisive in definitively closing the deal, and fending off challenges from Lazio and Real Madrid.

Kleber's heart in Europe

INTERNET

Atletico Paranaense midfielder Kleber is desperate for a move to Europe according to his club president Mario Celso Petraglia.

The young midfielder was a



KLEBERSON

revelation for Brazil in the latter stages of the World Cup, and many put it down to his inclusion that the Selecao improved so drastically at the back in the final three games.

"It's out of our hands and he is out of our plans for the next season," said Petraglia.

"He does not have enough motivation to come back and play for Paranaense. He would like to play for a team like Barcelona, Manchester United or Real Madrid."

Geremi cleared to play

INTERNET, Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough's loan signing Geremi has been granted a permit.

The Cameroonian international had earlier agreed a year-long move from Real Madrid.

But he then had to leave the country while his application was processed by the Department of Employment.

Boro have confirmed that the permit has been granted to allow manager Steve McClaren to slot another piece of the jigsaw into place.

Gazza the biggest ever!

Football

INTERNET

Paul Gascoigne was last night backed to become as big a name in the US as basketball's Michael Jordan in his attempt to breathe life into football in America.

Gazza, 35, flew to Washington yesterday to meet DC United coach Ray Hudson, a fellow Geordie, and discuss terms to see out his career.

Hudson has offered the former England star £5,000-a-week to become a sensation Stateside as America bids to build on its rising status in world football.

Hudson said: "I think Paul is four times more popular in England than Michael Jordan is in basketball over here. If you ask a silver-haired old lady in Exeter who Gazza is she'd know but I don't think someone of a similar age living in, say, Nebraska, would know Michael Jordan."

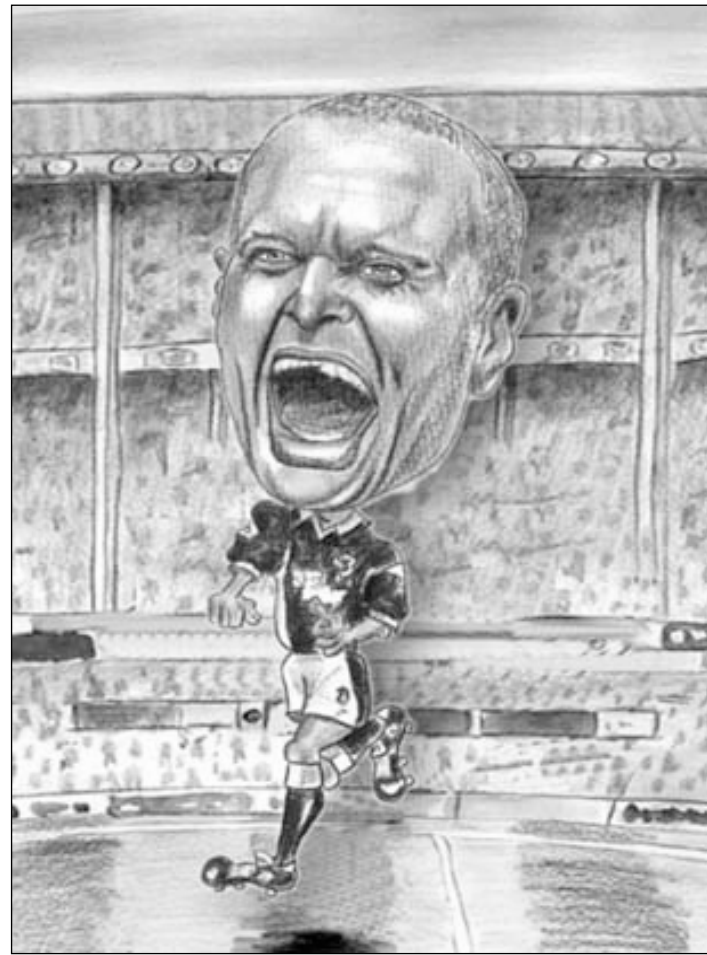
"That's because he has almost legendary status in England whereas he'll be able to settle into life here."

"Of course, our fervent hope is he will raise the profile of Major League Soccer even further."

"He has a wonderful opportunity to do that and follow in the footsteps of soccer pioneers like Pele, George Best and Franz Beckenbauer, who all played here. I played with them all. They were giants of the game, yet able to live their lives in relative anonymity over here."

He added: "We're still spreading the soccer gospel. The game is still growing and we can't afford any black eyes. "Our league has been a role-model for boys and girls up and down the country and we don't want to jeopardise that, so in effect I am taking a gamble on Paul."

"I'm staking my reputation on him, in fact. But there are lads in DC he will gravitate towards. Lads who are into the same things, like fish-



ing."

Hudson is well aware of Gazza's family ties and the wrench it would be for the midfielder to leave those closest to him behind in search of a final footballing fling.

Yet he believes the maverick former Newcastle, Tottenham and Lazio star has calmed down enough to prove an able asset to fourth-placed DC United's push for a play-off place in the Major League. "Paul has the opportunity to be a world soccer ambassador," said Hudson.

"I'm not saying he'd be some sort of cultural attache for soccer in this

country, but even he knows he will be scrutinised on and off the field.

"It's a whole new set of challenges but if I look in his Geordie eyes and connect with his Geordie spirit then I know I can convince him he can take this on his shoulders."

Gascoigne's roller-coaster ride of a career has also taken in Rangers, Middlesbrough, Everton and Burnley. His 57th and final England cap came against Belgium in 1998.

Riddled with demons on and off the field, his career has also been badly affected by his battle with

booze. During the World Cup his displays as a pundit for ITV sparked rumours he was back on the bottle after treatment for his drinking.

His short-term contract with First Division Burnley had already come to an end but his youthful enthusiasm has never deserted him and he confessed last season he still had dreams of playing for England.

"Those dreams came to nothing. But Hudson hopes Gascoigne - minus his misdemeanours - could fuel the dreams of a whole new generation on the other side of the Atlantic.

"He's 35 and no longer the pirate he was," added Hudson. "That will help him acclimatise to new surroundings. And it can work, it did for me."

"I came to Florida when I just turned 22 and it was like Pluto to me. A different planet and a totally new way of life. I even had problems with my accent. But I just concentrated on my football and that got me through. I know the same can happen for Paul."

But Gascoigne's former Spurs team-mate Gary Mabbutt warned him not to treat the opportunity as a holiday. He said: "It's not like when the first American league started, with Pele, Beckenbauer and Johan Cruyff there to entertain people."

"Now it's far more serious and competitive and from watching the World Cup, you can see the American players are very fit."

"It's going to be tough for Gazza, but I feel he has the ability to enjoy a couple of seasons there."

Mabbutt also believes the USA's lack of interest in football will suit Gascoigne.

"I went to stay with Jurgen Klinsmann and we went to Disneyland with our families," said Mabbutt. "Nobody recognised Jurgen, so Gazza is guaranteed to be able to live there with no one recognising him."

Pires points at fatigue

Football

INTERNET, London

Robert Pires has blamed his knee injury on football fatigue.

The France and Arsenal winger is on track to make a September return to full training after spending four months recovering from surgery on torn cruciate ligaments.

Pires, 29, believes the France players were put through too punishing a regime in the build-up to the World Cup.

The 1998 champions did not have to qualify for the tournament but few to Chile in September and Australia in November last year for friendlies.

He said: "This World Cup has been a real suffering for me."

"For me the main problem was above all physical - the team was 'au bout du rouleau' (a French slang

term meaning exhausted). "The players are with great European clubs but also their efforts were not saved at all."

"Chile and Australia - all that was just too much. Arsene Wenger was right to protest against these long trips."



ROBERT PIRES

"It took me three weeks to recover from Santiago and my injury was due to fatigue."

"These are mistakes that should not be made again in the future."

Pires is aware that to rush his comeback for the sake of a few extra weeks could have serious repercussions for his long-term fitness.

He added: "I work every day on my knee and I am very satisfied with the way it is improving."

"Everything is going well but everyone knows that in the case of an operated knee it is useless and foolish to try to go too fast."

"The most important thing is to take my time and be sure of making a full recovery."

"I am not going to take any risks just in order to play an extra one or two games."

"Until the end of August I will keep training on my own in St Albans and I think I will resume training with the group at the start of September."

Neville not so sure

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United defender Gary Neville has warned his team-mates that the arrival of Rio Ferdinand will not guarantee the English giants success this season.

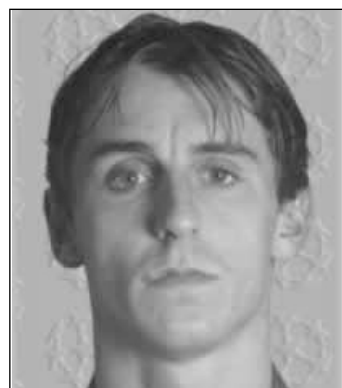
Neville said while Ferdinand's acquisition was a boost for the club, United still had to work hard to gel and make sure there was no repeat of last year's trophy-less nightmare. Neville, who is expected to miss the start of the season as he continues to recover from a broken foot, said last year's signings of Juan Sebastian Veron and Ruud van Nistelrooy proved his point.

"I think when we signed Juan Veron and Ruud van Nistelrooy last year everyone said this is it, we're going to win the European Cup because we've spent 50 million pounds," Neville told MUTV.

"This year we've spent a lot of money on one defender, but Rio Ferdinand is not going to make us into the best defence in the Premier League."

"We've all got to work hard as a team and make sure we help him and he helps us."

"Just because we've signed one of the best centre-halves in the world, which I think is a fact and certainly he's the best in England, it



GARY NEVILLE

doesn't make us brilliant defensively," he said.

"We all have to work hard on the training pitch and work hard in games because there will be a settling-in period."

Neville said United's problems were caused last year by the fact they used 14 different centre-half pairings throughout the campaign.

"If you look at us now, we have got the best young centre-backs in Britain, we've got great experience at centre-back in Laurent Blanc, so in terms of centre-back partnerships, it's just a case of finding the right one and sticking with it."

"We've had so many over the last three or four years and it's certainly not helped us," he said.

Atletico dream big

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid still hope that Rivaldo will reject a lucrative offer from AC Milan and instead stay in Spain to play for them on their return to the First Division.

The Brazilian World Cup winner, who is a free agent since he terminated his contract with Barcelona last week, is in talks with the Serie A club but has not yet made a final decision.

"There are times when money is not the most important consideration and I am optimistic," Atletico's sporting director Paulo Futre was quoted as saying on the club's official website on Thursday.

"I have made a proposal to Rivaldo's lawyers and now we have to wait and see what happens," said the former Portuguese international.

"We may not be as wealthy as Milan, but we are richer in terms of the affection we can show to him. Until he signs for the Italian club I am going to keep on dreaming."

Atletico, who were promoted after winning the Second Division championship last season, have been the most active Spanish club in the transfer market this summer.

They have brought in six new players including Spanish international striker Javi Moreno from AC Milan for around dollars 15 million.

Rivaldo scored five goals on the way to Brazil's World Cup win over Germany in Yokohama last month.

Schafer extends Cameroon stint

AFP, Berlin

Winfried Schafer, the German coach of Cameroon, agreed on Wednesday to extend his stint with the "Indomitable Lions" for another two years.

"The president of the (Cameroon Football) Federation has faxed me an offer and told me we should continue working together. The minister for sport is also of that view. Now I am going to sign," Schafer told German sports agency.

"If we put in a good showing at the African Nations Cup in 2004 I will keep up my work until the 2006 World Cup," added Schafer, who revealed English outfit Brighton had been in the hunt for his services.

"That would have been a way of getting into the English game - but I am so close to the Cameroonians that I want to remain with them," Schafer explained.

The 52-year-old, who was unable to take the Africans to the second phase of the World Cup finals a month ago, has made his key priorities an improvement in training conditions and the development of a scouting network to discover young talent.

Schafer, who cut his managerial teeth during 12 years at Karlsruhe prior to brief spells with Stuttgart and Tennis Borussia Berlin, took the Cameroon post in September last year and delivered the African Nations Cup in February.

China prefer a foreigner

Football

AFP, Beijing

Chinese football officials have decided to look for a high-profile overseas coach to replace Bora Milutinovic as manager of the misfiring national team, state media reported Thursday.

Delegates from local football associations meeting in Beijing decided that a well-qualified foreigner would be "one of the short-cuts for China to qualify for 2006 World Cup Finals", the Xinhua news agency said.

Local coaches were "still not ready to take the daunting challenge" of trying to leading the nation into a second World Cup, the officials said.

Any candidate would have to be "quite influential" and already know something about the Chinese game, they added, according to Xinhua.

No names have yet been officially suggested as a replacement

for Milutinovic, the vastly experienced Yugoslav coach who stepped down in June after China exited in the first round at their debut World Cup in South Korea.

Xinhua reported earlier this week that approaches were made to Lula Pereira, coach of Brazilian club Flamengo and Antonio Lopes, technical coordinator of the 2002 World Cup-winning Brazil team, but both refused the job.

China's youth team coach Shen Xiangfu was "heavily favoured" to be picked instead, the agency said Monday, before the officials' preference for a foreigner was announced.

Although fans and soccer officials were thrilled to qualify for the World Cup after more than four decades of failure, the team's evident struggle at football's top event set off a bout of soul searching.

China lost all three of their games, conceding nine goals and scoring none, while Asian rivals Japan and South Korea fared much better, the Koreans even reaching the semi-finals.

Fergie has faith in Veron

Football

INTERNET, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has backed Juan Sebastian Veron to confound his critics ahead of the new season.

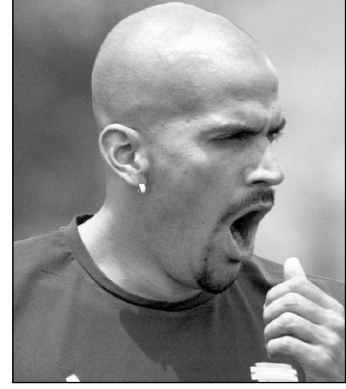
The Argentine midfielder was the subject of intense scrutiny last term as United failed to win any silverware and he endured a disappointing first round World Cup exit.

But Ferguson insisted Veron's United team-mates would rally around the player to help him through his difficult patch.

"Within the confines of the club we will continue to assure him and make sure it doesn't affect him," Ferguson told the Manchester Evening News.

"It is probably the first time in his life that he has been really criticised. "I still can't see that he was as bad as some people made out."

"It has been a new area for him. But he is a strong character and I know he will fight back."



JUAN SEBASTIAN VERON

and be strong enough to handle it. Which he definitely is."

Ferguson, who has since

smashed the British transfer record to buy Leeds defender Rio Ferdinand for £29.3m, also hinted he would persist with playing three central midfielders in a 4-5-1 formation next season.

The tactic coincided with United's poor start a year ago, when they slumped to mid-table before recovering to finish third in the Premiership.

"When we operated with three in midfield there is no doubt we controlled most of the games and our European form was terrific," said Ferguson.

"We are very hard to beat with three in the central midfield."

With Veron, Roy Keane, David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and Ryan Giggs, United are spoilt for choice in midfield.

"It can cause problems fitting people in when you have six excellent players in midfield," Ferguson added.

"But a full season gives you a feel of what is best for the team."

Escude an MU target

Football

INTERNET, London

Manchester United could be set to make a bid for the £4m-rated French defender Julien Escude.

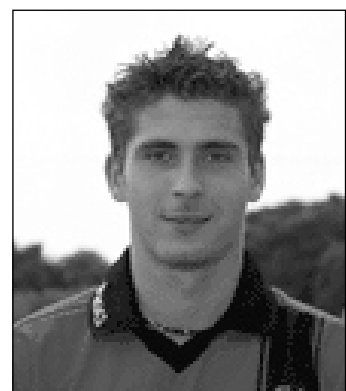
Sir Alex Ferguson needs extra cover at left-back following Denis Irwin's departure to Wolves.

And the Rennes defender, who earned rave reviews for his recent European Under-21 Championship displays with France, is keen to make the switch to Old Trafford.

"Manchester United are interested in Julien and have made enquiries," Escude's agent Axel Lablatiniere said.

"There has been no concrete offer made yet, but they are keen on the player."

"He caught the eye of several



JULIEN ESCUDE

clubs after impressing in the European Under-21 Championship.

"Leeds have also expressed an interest in Julien but again no firm offer has been received."

"Julien would really like to join

Hibs defender Ulises de la Cruz is on the verge of sealing a move to English Premiership side Aston Villa.

The Ecuador international, who impressed at the World Cup, has left the Scottish club's pre-season tour of Finland to travel to Birmingham for talks.

The clubs have agreed a fee for the player, BBC Scotland understands, although it is not thought to be the £2m figure quoted in earlier reports.

On Wednesday, Hibs' managing director Rod Petrie insisted that he planned to discuss the player's future on his return from Finland.

That was in response to quotes attributed to De la Cruz from a radio station in Ecuador.

"The money Aston Villa offered me is really good, but now I'm waiting for Hibernian's approval," he was reported to have told La Luna.

"I have followed Aston Villa's campaign in the Premiership. They have good players, and I won't have



ULISES DE LA CRUZ

problems fitting in with their fast game."

"Moving there would be another dream that comes true for me."

Hibernian paid a club record transfer fee of £700,000 to bring De la Cruz to Scotland last summer.

Despite a number of excellent attacking displays down the right flank, the Ecuador star came in for some criticism for his defensive displays. z

Figo would love it

Football

INTERNET, Madrid

Real Madrid midfielder Luis Figo says he would like to play alongside his former team-mate Rivaldo once again.

The Brazilian is currently available on a free transfer, and Real have been linked with a move.

Figo played alongside Rivaldo when the pair were together at Barca, and the Portuguese international says the idea of linking up once again is an attractive one.

"It is logical, that I would like to (play alongside Rivaldo), but I do not know if it is possible," said Figo. "I like to play with the best and he is one of the best players. If they request my opinion it is logical that I



LUIS FIGO

am positive. He is a player who guarantees quality and goals."

Salas among goals

Football

INTERNET, Saint Vincent

Juventus played their first summer friendly yesterday against a select side from Vallé d'Acoste. Lippi's team eventually won the game 8-1.

There were other positive signs for the Italian champions however, that's to say the complete recovery of Chilean Salas, who was missing for a large part of last season due to

a bad injury. Salas scored three times, Zalayeta twice while Camaranesi, Thuram and Trezeguet all netted once.

The Italians who took part in the World Cup were not present, and will only return to Juve's summer headquarters during the last few days of training. But Lippi said that he had seen positive signs, even if it's very early to draw any serious conclusions.