

## Batistuta to be back?

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Gabriel Batistuta quit international soccer after Argentina's World Cup debacle in June but he could be back in the side in their very next match.

Argentina, with World Cup coach Marcelo Bielsa likely to be back at the helm, meet Japan in a friendly in Tokyo in November with a recommendation from the organisers to include the famed goalscorer, Argentine media reports said on Thursday.

The twice world champions, whose country is immersed in an economic crisis, are being paid dollars 900,000 plus all expenses but are being asked to play a majority of the squad that started the World Cup among the favourites, they said.

Although no names were specified, Argentine Football Association (AFA) president Julio Grondona was told that Batistuta's inclusion would help boost the match revenue and Grondona was agreeable to the idea, the sports daily Ole said.

The match could serve as a happier Argentina farewell for Batistuta than the tearful goodbye after their 1-1 draw with Sweden in Miyagi on June 12 had spelt a shock first round World Cup elimination.

Batistuta scored one of Argentina's two goals in the tournament in their 1-0 victory over Nigeria -- taking his World Cup tally to 10 in three finals and his remarkable international record to 76 in 58 games.

He has a high profile among Japanese fans having scored in two Argentine 1-0 victories over Japan in the Kirin Cup in the early 1990s and the World Cup finals in France in 1998.

A 1-0 defeat to England in their second World Cup group game left Argentina needing to beat Sweden and their failure was the country's worst result in the finals in 40 years.

Bielsa's contract ended on June 30 and he looked unlikely to be given a second chance but as the World Cup wounds have begun healing so the AFA appear to have opted for continuity.

"The subject of Bielsa's extension is resolved," Grondona was quoted as saying in the daily Clarin, adding that the coach's re-appointment would be made official on Tuesday.

"(But) I can't say anything about the players that can go or not (to Japan), that's a matter for Bielsa," Grondona said.

## Inter get Cannavaro



FABIO CANNAVARO

REUTERS, Rome

Italian international defender Fabio Cannavaro has joined Inter Milan from Serie A rivals Parma.

In an unexpected move, the 29-year-old visited Inter's headquarters late Wednesday night to sign a four-year contract, according to a report on the club's website.

No financial details were provided, but La Gazzetta dello Sport said Inter had paid Parma 15 million euros.

The transfer has been overshadowed by speculation over whether Ronaldo would stay at Inter, where he has been since 1997, although his agent said on Wednesday the 25-year-old Brazil striker would not be moving to Real Madrid.

On Thursday morning, Cannavaro already had his blue and black Inter shirt. He was quoted on the Inter website as saying: "I am truly happy. I have a lot of international friends and companions at Inter."

Cannavaro, one of the most highly rated central defenders in the game, said three months ago that he planned to leave Parma, but began training with the team in July after failing to secure a transfer.

Despite being one of the few success stories of Italy's ill-fated World Cup campaign, Cannavaro has suffered from Italian football's financial crisis.

Most of the top clubs in Europe were expected to scramble for his signature but that was before the full scale of the crisis became apparent. "The arrival of Cannavaro is a great thing, he is one of the strongest defenders in the world," Uruguayan winger Alvaro Recoba said.



PHOTO: AFP

RARING TO GO: AC Milan's Brazilian superstar Rivaldo sprints during a training session at Milanello on August 7.

## Scolari's decision day

Football

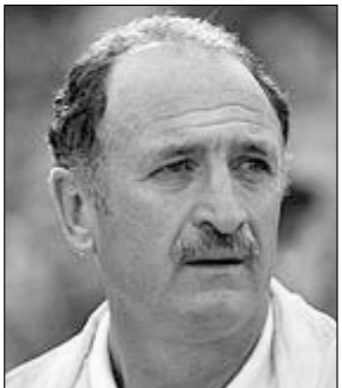
INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Never one to bow to the wishes of others, Luis Felipe Scolari is expected to make an announcement on his future, ending the tug-of-war that has been waged between his family and the Brazilian football federation (CBF) on Thursday.

Brazil will know by Friday whether the friendly against Paraguay in Fortaleza on 21 August, Brazil's first match since beating Germany 2-0 in the World Cup final, is to be his last match in charge.

Since leading the Selecao to World Cup triumph in June Scolari has kept commentators guessing as to his next move: would he stay with the national side as is the CBF's wish, or would he bow to familial concerns and quit while he is so emphatically ahead? The smart money is on the latter occurrence. There is, by definition, only one way for Scolari the coach of Brazil to go, and that is down. During a recent skiing holiday in Chile the tough, non-sense man known as Felipeo (Big Phil) admitted when

interviewed that the proposition of coaching a country like Chile was an attractive one. (He has also been linked with Mexico). La Roja finished dead last in the 10-team South American World Cup qualifying pool, offering a single-minded coach a gill-edged chance of more



LUIS FELIPE SCOLARI

success. The chances of glory with Brazil are, conversely, greatly diminished as a direct result of their success. The nation expects, as it did when he took over the poisoned chalice last June nothing less than one victory after another. He admitted

that his first three months in charge of Brazil were 'Hell' and Scolari, by staying, will be opening himself up to the same kind of derision that greeted his early tenure.

A far cry from the glittering praise that showered his World Cup winners, an early label bestowed by the press upon Scolari's Brazil was 'the stupidest team in the world'. That epithet followed a 2-0 loss to Honduras in the Copa America - one of a horrendous string of defeats that forced Brazilian football writers into an unprecedented use of the word unprecedented and Scolari careered towards an ignominious place in history as the first coach not to lead Brazil to a World Cup.

As though all the positive publicity that has surrounded him recently has gotten too much, he reverted to type to clash with prominent members of Brazil's soccerati.

In a stunning verbal assault Scolari claimed that the legendary Pele knew 'nothing about football' and accused Ronaldo of being spoilt (an accusation perhaps with merit considering the ease with which the FC Internazionale striker wanted to leave Inter, the club that had stood by him throughout his injury hell).

Whatever his decision, as is the character of the man, Big Phil will do it his way.

## Intertoto Cup Fulham a step closer

REUTERS, London

English Premier League club Fulham progressed to the final of the Intertoto Cup after beating France's Sochaux 2-0 away in the second leg of their semi-final.

Sylvain Legwinski put the Londoners ahead in the 64th minute while Barry Hayles made it 2-0 on the night and 3-0 on aggregate six minutes later.

Jean Tigana's team must now beat Italian Serie A side Bologna over two legs to book a place in the UEFA Cup.

Bologna beat Czech's FC Teplice 3-1 away and 8-2 on aggregate with two goals from Claudio Bellucci and one from Carlo Nevro within the first 20 minutes.

In the other semi-finals, Stuttgart beat Slaven Belupo 1-0 in Croatia thanks to a goal from Sean Dundee in the 39th minute.

The Germans, who progressed with a 3-1 aggregate victory, face Lille in their final after the French side beat England's Aston Villa 2-0 away for a 3-1 aggregate victory.

Elsewhere, Troyes of France beat Spain's Villarreal 2-1 after a goalless first leg, and will face Malaga after the southern Spanish club beat Dutch side Willem II 1-0 for a 3-1 aggregate win.

The winners of the three finals will play in next season's UEFA Cup.

## Rivaldo's Milan mission

Football

INTERNET, Milan

Rivaldo was unveiled as an AC Milan player at an incredibly crowded press-conference at the City's Hotel Gallia on Monday.

The Brazilian World Cup winner was officially presented to the press and to Milan supporters, with vice-president Adriano Galliani visibly satisfied as the Master of Ceremonies.

Rivaldo made every attempt to avoid commenting on questions regarding his friend and teammate Ronaldo and his problems with Inter ("We are here for AC Milan, and I won't speak about Inter" he said), nor did he speak of Van Gaal who was apparently central to his departure from Barcelona.

Rivaldo said, "I left Barcelona because the situation was unendurable. If I wasn't happy, this was the only thing I could do, so we reached an agreement for the contract termination. Then I accepted the offer from AC Milan and I hope it has been the right choice."

"I was close to signing for AC Milan two years ago, but I was having negotiations with Barcelona and at that moment the Spanish side had much more money than the Italian one, so there was never going to be a real negotiation. Why I chose AC Milan? Because it's a great team."

His first impressions of Milan city and AC Milan seemed very positive: "I'm very happy to be here. I've a good impression from my teammates, my new supporters and AC Milan headquarters: it's really impressive. I hope to be able to repay AC Milan, president Berlusconi and Mr Galliani for the faith they have in me". Then, answering a question about what his first impressions of the Italian championship were he stated: "I know it won't be easy, as always, but AC Milan is a team that know success: I hope I'm able to do my part. AC Milan have a hunger for success: we are a group of big players and we can't fail. I've arrived here to immediately win the scudetto".

"Even though I am a world champion I would like to do great things with Milan ... win the league this year," said Rivaldo.

But who are the favourites for this scudetto, obviously in addition to AC Milan? "I have no fear for anyone, only respect. I expect positive things from Roma, Juventus and Inter".

Someone asked him if and how he could find new motivations and stimulus after having won the World Cup, and he answered: "I've a big passion and the fact that I have changed jerseys will be a big stimulus for me also because I will have to start from the beginning. I'd like things to go positively here in Italy as it has gone at my previous teams".

Then vice-president Galliani

cleared any dispute over his jersey number: "He'll wear jersey number 11. About this I want to thank Tomasson to whom this jersey was initially given: he understood the situation and left that to Rivaldo, while he will wear number 15. He showed himself to be a very intelligent person".

Rivaldo also spoke about his favourite role: "I prefer playing in the middle, but I'll be at the complete disposal of coach to help him and the team find the way to win".

Someone also asked him something about his incredible scoring ratio in Spain: "In Italy it will be difficult to maintain that level of scoring, but I'll do everything possible to maintain it".

At the end there was space for a spicy question: a journalist in fact asked him to make a comparison between Barcelona and AC Milan, and his answer was a really diplomatic one: "They are both big teams, but it's impossible to make a comparison. I left a big club to arrive at another big club".

After the press-conference Rivaldo greeted his new supporters, then he left for Milanello, AC Milan's headquarters, to have his first official training. It will be difficult to see him playing in the Champions League preliminaries against Slovan Liberec next week, instead it's possible that he'll play for a few minutes on the 18th of August during the Berlusconi Trophy against Juventus.

## End of the drama?

Football

INTERNET, Milan

The dust is finally beginning to settle on the protracted transfer saga involving FC Internazionale's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo, who will not now be moving to Real Madrid, after the Spanish giants decided to end their interest in the striker.

Real Madrid's general manager Jorge Valdano administered the final blow by saying, "Plans to bring Ronaldo to Real Madrid are off, and the debate is now over. It was the player's agent (Alexandre Martins) who contacted us first and what followed turned into a media circus."

Rumours first surfaced of a possible move when Ronaldo came back with a bang for Brazil this summer, inspiring them to a fifth World Cup triumph. His performances in Japan and the Korean Republic alerted Real - surely the only club who could afford his transfer at present.

Whilst the 'phenomenon' enjoyed a well earned break in his native Brazil, his representatives were already trying to arrange a route out of the San Siro and into the Bernabeu. Martins even told reporters: "He [Ronaldo] does not want to continue at Inter. He wants to rediscover happiness and the best conditions to play football. He's looking for the smile that he lost in Milan but can rediscover in Madrid."

On his return to Milan, Ronaldo demanded a transfer, yet president Massimo Moratti stood firm and Martins was forced to tell Real that Inter would be unlikely to release Ronaldo. At that point Valdano decided to call a halt to any potential transfer.

The biggest loser in this whole affair appears to be Ronaldo, whose legion of advisers, agents and representatives quickly went to work, smoothing his return to Inter. "Ronaldo has chosen the Italian club. He is an Inter player and will continue to be for 365 days for the next four years," said Martins.

However, it may take more than just words for the Brazilian to get back into Inter's good books. The fans at Milan's airport welcomed Ronaldo back to Italy with placards claiming he was 'ungrateful' and the

saga also drew a stinging rebuke from Bayern Munich legend Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"It's an absolute farce in my view. When a player is injured for two years and pockets 100 percent (of his salary), then plays the World Cup which provides no benefit for his club and then wants away with a new contract, you have to ask yourself about that player's character and that of his advisor."

The German, who is known for his outspoken views on transfer and player issues, said he had discussed the matter with Real president Florentino Perez.

"That can't be the future of football. We don't want this kind of legionnaire system," said Rummenigge.

Ronaldo meanwhile was trying

to settle back in Milan after the incident-filled last few days. After lunch with his agent Martins and spokesman Paiva at Lake Como, Ronaldo returned to Pinetina for "training". Not with the ball, but with the golf club. The superstar star relaxed with a game of golf among friends.

His teammates are also beginning to believe that Ronaldo has his mind settled at last. At Bari, Italian international Luigi Di Biagio said following Inter's victory in a friendly match over English Premiership club Chelsea: "I don't know what the fans think about the Ronaldo situation, we've spoken to him and he seems to be the usual Ronie, cheerful and calm. He's anything but sad."



PHOTO: INTERNET

TIME TO SWITCH TO GOLF! Inter Milan superstar Ronaldo relaxes with a game of golf at Inter's training base in Pinetina yesterday.

## Barca outclass Magpies

Football

REUTERS, Newcastle

Barcelona swept aside Newcastle United to warm up for the final Champions League qualifying round with an emphatic 3-0 win on Wednesday.

Patrick Kluyvert opened Barcelona's account before he was joined on the scoresheet by Javier Saviola and Luis Enrique.

Kluyvert also missed a penalty after Barcelona cruised to victory before 51,257 spectators - a record for a St James's Park friendly.

"We learnt a lesson from this defeat by Barcelona although I would not say they taught us one," Newcastle manager Bobby Robson said.

"Barcelona are a classy side and showed that with their possession and movement.

"They kept hold of the ball for six, seven or eight passes just waiting to penetrate our defence.

They were also brilliant defensively.

"We will be better for the experience and we will certainly be fitter. We lost to a crack side but it was a flattering scoreline."

Newcastle dominated the opening exchanges and home debutant Hugo Viana set up their best chance in the 12th minute.

His swingeing cross from the left wing was met by Nikos Dabizas whose powerful header was repelled by goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

That chance came just minutes after Barcelona defender Carlos Puyol was stretchered off following a clumsy challenge by Magpies captain Alan Shearer.

Kluyvert broke the deadlock in the 28th minute.

The Dutch striker was first to compatriot Philip Cocu's long ball, getting the better of Dabizas and then Titus Bramble before slotting the ball home from 15 yards.

Saviola doubled the advantage in the 35th minute. He latched on to Gaizka Mendieta's astute chip to break the offside trap and slam a

rising shot past the helpless Shay Given.

Mendieta set up Barcelona's third in the 49th minute when his curling cross from the right wing was headed home by Luis Enrique who timed his run to perfection, leaving the defence stranded.

Kluyvert then saw his 58th minute penalty, awarded for a Bramble foul, superbly saved by Republic of Ireland keeper Given.

Barcelona coach Louise van Gaal was quick to praise Kluyvert after the game.

"We were lucky not to be behind after the first 20 minutes because Newcastle had played very well."

"But we scored a goal which was indicative of the quality of Patrick Kluyvert."

"It was very good individual play. Then we played very well, controlled the game and had great possession of the ball."

Barcelona can now look forward to meeting Polish team Legia Warsaw in their Champions League third qualifying round tie while Newcastle will face Bosnian side Zeljeznicar.

## Veron, Scholes Butt-ed out?

INTERNET, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson is ready to turn up the heat on Juan Sebastian Veron and Paul Scholes by giving Nicky Butt the chance to establish himself in the heart of Manchester United's midfield.

The United manager was so impressed by Butt's form last season and his World Cup performances for England he sees no way he can leave the former bit-part player on the sidelines.

And Ferguson's public declaration of loyalty to Butt is the worst possible news for Veron and Scholes, who both seem certain to start the new campaign on the bench.

Ferguson has already acknowledged he faces a huge selection dilemma with six world-class midfielders - Roy Keane, Butt, Scholes, Veron, David Beckham and Ryan Giggs - at his disposal.

Skipper Keane is immovable in the middle, and there is no direct challenge to Beckham and Giggs in the wide roles when both are fit.

But the question of who should fill the remaining central midfield role has become the most contentious issue at United ahead of the new campaign.

It now seems Butt, 27, for so long a member of the Old Trafford supporting cast, is finally ready to take centre stage.

"Nicky Butt is the one player I'd say in my club who is almost certain to start the new season," said Ferguson.

"I think he may well be one of the stars of the next year."

"Here is a player who came in when we needed someone to galvanise us last season and did the job fantastically."

"Then he went to the World Cup and was a star man for England. Nicky hasn't been a regular in the United side but he's developed and matured by watching as well as playing."

"He was fantastic last year, what a season he had. In fact, I'd go as far as to say he's possibly the biggest bonus I've got this season."

"Only once did he ever complain at being left out. But I always knew he'd play a part. Now his part is even bigger."

"If you have six fantastic midfield players it can create problems in terms of who to pick and who to leave out."

But he conceded playing at the highest level has given him the self-belief that he belongs there.

"When you're playing well and doing well, you perhaps try things you wouldn't otherwise," said Butt.

"Confidence is a massive part of it, as it is in any job. I know what I'm capable of and I just hope I get the chance to prove that this season."

"I've played some good games for United, but it's difficult when you're not playing all the time. I don't spray long balls like Becks, I tend to be a more simple passer."

"Hopefully simple is effective."

United returned from their pre-season tour of Scandinavia yesterday with Ferguson still unsure whether Beckham and Rio Ferdinand will be ready for next week's Champions League qualifier.

Ferguson still has concerns over the fitness of both following their World Cup exploits, but Beckham is in no doubt £30million record signing Ferdinand will prove a huge success at United.

Beckham said: "For me, Rio is one of the best young defenders in the world, and he proved that in the World Cup."

"He has come to Manchester United and I am sure while that has upset a few people, he has made a few people here very happy."

"I don't know whether it is luck or whether he means it all the time, but the manager picks players who fit in straight away with the rest of the lads when they come here."

## Effenberg ponders future

REUTERS, Berlin

Former German international and Bayern Munich playmaker Stefan Effenberg is considering ending his career after he failed to secure a move to Turkish side Besiktas.

The 34-year-old, out of contract with Bayern, has seen a number of possible prospects vanish and says he will decide by next Wednesday whether or not to keep playing.

"The deadline is next Wednesday. By then there'll be a decision. Either a new club or the end of my career," Effenberg told top-selling newspaper Bild on Thursday.

The midfield playmaker, who helped Bayern to their 2000 Champions League success, said many fans had encouraged him to continue playing, but he was disenchanted that he had not been able to train with a club. His jogging partner, his dog, had also disappeared.

"It's getting to me that I've only been able to jog in the woods and do general fitness. I'm also upset about the lack of seriousness of the many advisers who want to make business on the back of my name," he said.