

Feeling Milan

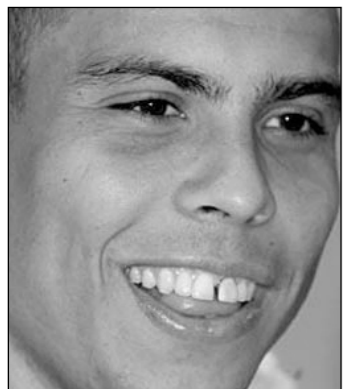
Football

REUTERS, Milan

Brazil's World Cup winners Rivaldo and Ronaldo got very different receptions when they arrived in Italy this week for the start of the new season.

Rivaldo, snapped up by AC Milan after his Barcelona contract expired, was greeted by a sea of roaring fans at Milan's airport on Monday and has since been drowned in press and TV praise.

"You are famous for your tendency to sacrifice yourself for your team," one starry-eyed reporter fawned at the striker's official intro-



RONALDO

duction. "Do you expect to do the same as Milan?"

Fans decked out in the club's red and black stripes thronged the press conference at a hotel in an otherwise deserted Milan. The club's website has seen daily page hits surge to more than a million after talks to acquire Rivaldo began on July 22.

The 30-year-old playmaker even got a call from Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, AC Milan's owner, welcoming him to club and country.

But for Ronaldo, it was a whole different ball game. Even if he avoided meeting his team mates yesterday, after he avoided leaving Inter headquarters before their arrival, it still seems more than possible that Ronaldo will stay at

Inter.

But it won't be easy, because one of his first aims will be to win back the faith of the black and blue supporters, who were really disappointed by his behaviour and the way he showed only a few days ago to leave Italy with destination Real Madrid. Rodrigo Paiva, personal friend and Ronaldo's press-agent thinks that only a few matches and a few goals will be necessary to obtain the affection of the supporters once again.

He said that Ronaldo will be able to change his behaviour with his game: "The beautiful thing about soccer is that it is possible to solve all problems simply by playing, and when Ronie scores twice, supporters will forget everything".

But despite the news arriving from Madrid that sees Real having completely halted every type of negotiation, Paiva still left the door open for a possible transfer: "In soccer anything is possible.

"I used to love him, but now I hate him," said one fan who identified himself only as Patrizio. Ronaldo was even satirised on the front page of one newspaper in a cartoon portraying him with a Euro currency sign sculpted onto his pate.

"I'm back among you," the cartoon Ronaldo says. "Your same old Euro-naldo."

Fans said they felt betrayed by a player who has spent most of his four years at Inter

recovering from injury and now appeared to want to move to Real Madrid. "We're tired of waiting for some kind of explanation from him. For three years we've spoiled him and now, enough," said Inter supporter

Alessio Triuli.

"He should be ashamed how he has behaved. He should have the courage to speak with us and Moratti," said another Inter fan Alessandro Franchi, referring to club president Massimo Moratti.

Moratti, who paid \$27.9 million to lure Ronaldo from Barcelona in 1997, said there could be no Inter without Ronaldo and that if anyone was going to buy him they'd have to pay at least 100 million euros.

Having said he wanted to hear from Ronaldo personally if the striker really wanted to leave, Moratti eventually talked to him by telephone.

"We told each other that a relationship of love could not be transferred into a hateful one," Moratti



RIVALDO

told newspapers.

But in a stance unlikely to endear him to fans anytime soon, Ronaldo still seemed lukewarm about Inter.

"Ronaldo will keep working regularly, waiting for a reply from the club" to the concerns he has raised, said his official website.

Inter fans gave a mixed verdict on Ronaldo's decision to stick it out in Milan, with some willing to give him a second chance but many others favouring an immediate transfer.

"I say let him go, let's remember that he's not the Ronaldo of three years ago and his physical reliability is low," one fan said on a web sports forum. "Just imagine if he hurts his knee the first day of play and skips the whole season."

Scolari keeps everybody waiting

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has delayed a decision over whether he will continue in the job for the second time this week, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) has said.

Scolari, who had been due to announce his decision Thursday afternoon, will instead wait until Friday, the CBF said in a statement. He had originally been expected to make his decision known on Monday.

Scolari, who defied all the odds by leading Brazil to their fifth world title, has been tight-lipped on the subject since the World Cup final on

June 30, when his agreement to coach Brazil officially ended.

The man known as 'Big Phil', who has enjoyed celebrity status since the 2-0 win over Germany in Yokohama, is reportedly caught between his family, who want him to step down, and CBF president Ricardo Teixeira, who wants him to continue.

Thursday's media conference is believed to have been postponed because Teixeira had other commitments.

Scolari, who took over the Brazil team in June last year after previously coaching Cruzeiro, angrily denied on Thursday that the issue was about money.

"When I joined the Brazil team, I was earning less than I was at Cruzeiro," he said. "The people who invented this story have no brains."

Bierhoff plans one more year

Football

AFP, Hamburg

German international striker Oliver Bierhoff plans one more season of top flight football before he brings the curtain down on his career.

The 34-year-old ex-Monaco player, who was part of the Germany squad which finished runners-up to Brazil at the World Cup, told Kicker magazine on

Thursday he had been in touch with two clubs, one in England and one in Italy. "This season will definitely be my

last," said Bierhoff who left the French club after falling out with coach Didier Deschamps and had originally announced that he would quit at the end of the World Cup.

He also hit back at rumours that he had been the preferred choice of Udinese in Italy before the Serie A club opted for fellow German striker Carsten Jancker instead.

"I was never in contact with Udinese on this subject," said Bierhoff who added that it was possible his name had been added to the equation as a means of increasing pressure on Jancker to make up his mind over the transfer from German giants Bayern Munich.

Real, Roma fire blanks

Football

AFP, East Rutherford, New Jersey

Defending Champions League winners Real Madrid and AS Roma played to a scoreless tie in an international friendly here Thursday.

A crowd of 70,635 watched the two European teams battle in a pre-season friendly at Giants Stadium, which is part of Real's 100th anniversary celebration.

It was the largest crowd to watch a football match here since 78,416 spectators witnessed Brazil play the FIFA World All-Stars on July 14, 1996.

Real dominated in the early

going as Roma goalkeeper Francesco Antonioli was forced to make a diving save on a 10-yard header by Ivan Helguera in the 10th minute.

But the Italian had its chances as well. Antonio Cassano fed Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta a perfect through ball in the 23rd minute. Batistuta went one-on-one with Iker Casillas as the goalkeeper managed to tip his 15-yard shot away.

Casillas was called on twice in the second half. He produced a two-handed save off Walter Samuel's point-blank shot in the 61st minute. He then denied Damiano Tommasi's half volley in the 75th minute.

French First Division Auxerre blank Montpellier

Football

AFP, Paris

Auxerre picked up their first win of the new French season with a 2-0 win over Montpellier on Thursday but their performance would have given coach Guy Roux some nervous moments as they prepare to open their Champions League campaign next week.

Auxerre face Boavista of Portugal on Tuesday in the preliminary round of Europe's premier club competition but, needing a confi-

dence boosting performance as well as result, they struggled to break down a well-organised Montpellier defence.

In fact they had to wait until their opponents were reduced to ten men, when Habib Bamogo was red-carded for a foul on Eric Assati, before they could make a breakthrough.

Djibril Cisse, last season's top-scorer in the French championship, grabbed the first goal in the 73rd minute after being set up by Teemu Taino before Zimbabwain international Benjamin Mwaruwari added the second with a minute left.

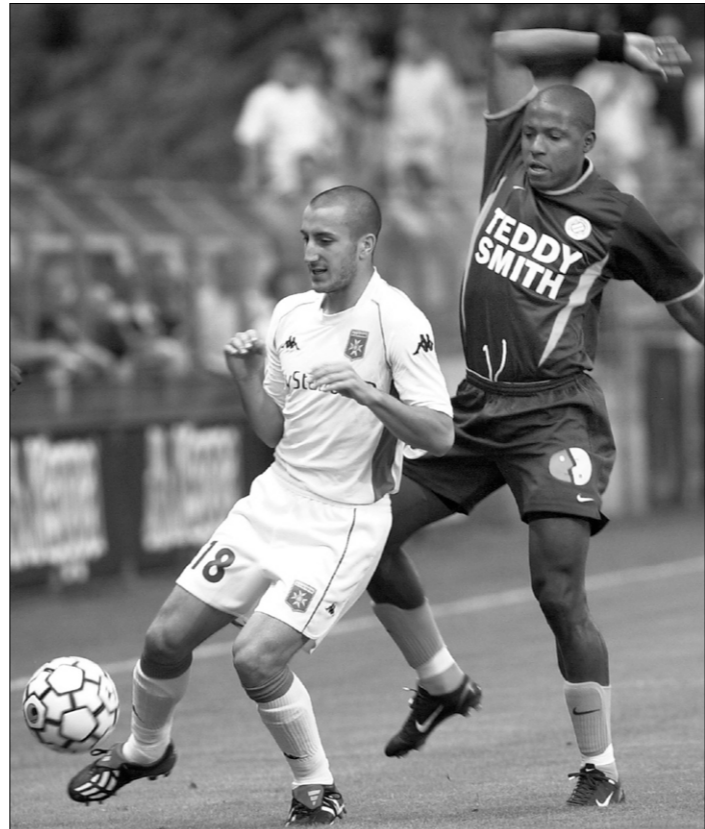


PHOTO: AFP

Lionel Mathis (L) of Auxerre shields the ball from Montpellier's Colombian international Victor Bonilla at Auxerre on August 8.

Bundesliga preview

Bayern the team to beat

Football

AFP, Berlin

German champions Borussia Dortmund will set the ball rolling for the new season Friday when they entertain Hertha Berlin - but a rejuvenated Bayern Munich will be looking to stick close by when they open up Saturday at Borussia Mönchengladbach.

Already, Bayern and Hertha could have the psychological advantage over the champions, who are missing a couple of key elements ahead of what should be a glitzy opener at the Westfalenstadion.

Dortmund suffered a big blow a week ago with the news that Brazilian striker Marcio Amoroso will miss the first three months of the season with an Achilles tendon inflammation.

Amoroso scored 18 times in the league last season as he finished joint-top scorer with Martin Max of 1860 Munich and his absence will be a major hindrance going into not just the Bundesliga campaign but also the Champions League.

Dortmund are also without talented midfielder Lars Ricken, who has a high injury.

In stark contrast, Hertha are cock-a-hoop having already lifted the league cup pre-season with a 4-1 thumping of Schalke.

The side from the capital ironically, given the absence of Amoroso, see their own Brazilian international, striker Luizao, as key to their hopes of scoring an upset.

Luizao has just arrived on a four-year contract from Gremio Porto Alegre - although he did not feature in the World Cup-winning Brazil team.

While Matthias Sammer's Dortmund look to make an assault on a second Champions League success after 1997, as well as have a tilt at a domestic title defence the big questionmark is whether Bayern Munich will bounce back from a trophyless season, their first in almost a decade.

A further sub-plot is whether Bayer Leverkusen, runners-up in the league, the Champions League and the German Cup, can get off their knees and land the silverware they deserved to last time out.

FIXTURES	
Friday:	Borussia Dortmund v Hertha BSC
Saturday:	Borussia Mönchengladbach v Bayern Munich, Schalke 04 v VfL Wolfsburg, VfB Stuttgart v FC Kaiserslautern, Energie Cottbus v Bayer Leverkusen, FC Nuremberg v VfL Bochum
Sunday:	SV Hamburg v Hannover 96, Arminia Bielefeld v Werder Bremen
Wednesday:	1860 Munich v Hansa Rostock

Without mercurial midfielder Michael Ballack, who has joined Bayern, that may prove a difficult task.

Worse still for Leverkusen is the news that skipper and key central defender Jens Nowotny has had another knee operation and will be out of action until the start of 2003.

Striker Oliver Neuville is also doubtful for the opening day with a foot injury.

Leverkusen open their programme at former East German side Energie Cottbus.

Bayern have been busy buying all the talent they can lay their

hands on. Ballack is just one of their new pieces in their jigsaw but coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has also splashed out nine million euros on Hertha Berlin's Sebastian Deisler and another capture was Leverkusen's Brazilian favourite Ze Roberto for a similar sum.

But the Bavarians are not just buyers.

They look set to hang onto England midfielder Owen Hargreaves, who interests Arsenal and Liverpool. Bayern and the 21-year-old are in discussions on a new contract through to the next World Cup and the player said Wednesday he was confident an agreement was near.

Bayern, who have offloaded veterans Carsten Jancker, Stefan Effenberg and Paulo Sergio, have an injury worry concerning Paraguayan striker Roque Santa Cruz, who faces several months out with an ankle injury.

That means more responsibility for Peruvian Claudio Pizarro, who says he is up to the task.

"We didn't reach our goals last season. This season we're ready, we have a number of excellent new signings," said the confident South American.

Bayern have, meanwhile, parted company with former Swiss international midfielder Ciriaco Sforza, who rarely featured last season and is said to be interesting Hamburg.

Other matches see Schalke host Wolfsburg, Stuttgart meet Kaiserslautern, Nuremberg face Bochum, Hamburg tackle Hannover 96 in an all-northern battle while fellow newcomers Arminia Bielefeld come up against Werder Bremen.

Finally, 1860 Munich take on Hansa Rostock next Wednesday.

Figo won't take blame

Football

REUTERS, Lisbon

Portuguese midfielder Luis Figo is ready to quit the international game if he is blamed for his side's disastrous showing in the recent World Cup, he has said.

"If public opinion thinks I am the culprit, I have no problem with resigning from the national team," Figo, who helped his country reach the Euro 2000 semi-finals, told sports daily A Bola.

"It is not (my intention), but if I should be pointed out as one of those mainly responsible for our lack of success, I don't know if there will be any alternative," added the FIFA Player of the Year.

With a squad comprising experienced players from Europe's top clubs, Portugal were tipped to go far in the World Cup and most pundits felt they were favoured by being drawn in the group stage against lesser lights Poland, the United States and co-hosts South Korea.

But in their opening game Portugal conceded three goals in the first 35 minutes to the United States and could only fight back to bring the final score to 3-2.

A change in tactics helped trigger a morale-boosting 4-0 win over Poland in the second game, which kept Portugal in with a chance of reaching the knock-out stage.

Then in their third match, nine-man Portugal went down to a late goal by Korea and were knocked out after striker Joao Pinto was sent off for a tackle from behind and defender Beto Severo picked up two

goal in the semi-finals of the European championship two years ago.

Some of Portugal's World Cup squad have already resigned from international football, notably defender Jorge Costa, a former World Youth champion along with "golden boys" like Figo and Joao Pinto.

Figo, who turns 30 later this year, said his generation was not finished yet, and might still help a team whose next big challenge is the 2004 European championship, to be held in Portugal.

"There are many players who still have a lot to give to the team. But if those responsible should think there are better players, as far as we are concerned, there is no problem, because we all want the best for the team," he said.

"I also have no doubts there are new and good players."

Figo added that he had finally recovered from a persistent ankle injury and was looking forward to his third season with Real Madrid, in whose recent pre-season centenary tournament he scored two goals.

"In terms of motivation and the will to do well, I feel as if I had just arrived. I feel good and have high hopes for a great season to help the club do its best," he said.



LUIS FIGO

yellow cards.

Portugal fielded basically the same squad as in Euro 2000, but many players looked jaded in Korea and were a shadow of the side which lost to France on a golden

Milan focus on Nesta

AP, Milan

Italian Serie A club AC Milan were negotiating the possible transfer of top young defender Alessandro Nesta from Lazio, at a reported fee of about 35 million euros (about \$19 million).

The website of the Milan club, which is owned by Italian premier and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, confirmed that talks between the two clubs about Nesta's transfer were in progress but did not give further details. Italian sports newspapers, however, said the transfer fee could be as high as 35 million euros.

Nesta, 26, is considered one of the world's best defenders and was part of Italy's World Cup team this summer.

AC Milan, who recently signed Brazilian star-forward Rivaldo, turned to Nesta after failing to get Italy's other star young defender Fabio Cannavaro from Parma. Cannavaro, who had been in talks with AC Milan and Juventus, unexpectedly joined Inter Milan on Wednesday.

The one-time dominant Milan club won its last league title in 1999, and are trying to improve a defence that has been considered the team's weakest element, even though it includes such big names as Paolo Maldini and Roque Junior.

'Break please' says Owen

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool striker Michael Owen has backed calls for a winter break in the English premier league, saying the England team were too tired to win the World Cup in June.

The European Footballer of the Year, in remarks reported in British newspapers, said England would have had a better chance in the tournament if they were not exhausted after a long season of domestic and European club soccer.

England were knocked out of the World Cup in the quarter-finals by eventual winners Brazil but Owen believes they might have done better if they had had a mid-season break.

"My view and the view of a lot of the England players was we would have benefited from going into the tournament a lot fresher," Owen said.

"The state of the squad going into the World Cup was not what it might have been if we had not played so many games.

"I think a few England players would have performed better if

they had not picked up an injury going into the tournament or just had a tough season," he said.

"The length and intensity of the premiership is something that has been talked about for a long time. I'd like to avoid reducing the number of games we play but we should look at restructuring the fixture list somehow.

"It is a hard situation and I don't know how to resolve it. It all depends on what a winter break would involve. It has to be a clean break from football.

"It is hard to say how far we would have gone (in the World Cup) if everyone had been fit. A lot of favourites went out early and people were saying this was the best chance England would ever have of becoming world champions.

"Maybe that would have been the case if we had beaten Brazil. But we had five really tough games at that stage so who knows what would have happened."

However Richard Scudamore, chief executive of the premier league, poured cold water on the idea telling the Mirror: "We'd like to have a winter break but I just can't see how it is practical."

Ballack's language problem!

REUTERS, Berlin

German international midfielder Michael Ballack is having problems settling in at his new club Bayern Munich - not for playing reasons but because the local Bavarian dialect is so impenetrable.

Ballack, who comes from Chemnitz in the former Communist east, is more at home with the language spoken by most Germans, called High German.

The Bavarian dialect is difficult for non-natives of the southern state as it differs sharply from High German.

"The young people speak good High German. But the older people often speak thick Bavarian and I can't understand them. So I just nod," said Ballack, who moved from Bayer Leverkusen in the off-season.



MICHAEL BALLACK



OTTMAR HITZFELD

Elber.

Club president Franz Beckenbauer believes Ballack's arrival will greatly strengthen the Munich side.

Spurs still on Morientes' trail

Football

REUTERS, London

Tottenham Hotspur have not given up hope of landing Real Madrid's Spain striker Fernando Morientes despite reports that their audacious bid has failed, manager Glenn Hoddle said on Thursday.

Some British newspapers had suggested the transfer was off after Morientes said the club, who finished ninth in the English premier league last season, were not successful enough for him.

But Hoddle insisted talks with Real over the player, who British newspapers say is rated at 19 million pounds (\$29.11 million), are continuing.

"At the moment we're in negotiations with Real Madrid and that's about as much as we can say on that side," the former England coach told the Spurs Web site.

"We wouldn't be where we are if we didn't think there was the possibility of him coming, it's the same as any other player.

"He's on the list, along with other players that we're working towards. We're a bit disappointed - we've been working on this for six or seven weeks with nothing said and it has suddenly got out [to the media].

"We are totally genuine. If it happens, it happens - if it doesn't



FERNANDO MORTIENTES

I know where I want to go after that."

Hoddle claimed Brazilian striker Ronaldo's failure to move from Inter Milan to Real Madrid would have no bearing on Tottenham's attempts to prise Morientes from the Bernabeu.

"To be quite honest, we've been talking for six or seven weeks [about Morientes] and I don't think Ronaldo comes into the scenario, quite frankly," he said.

Hoddle, who is eager to bring success to the north London club he graced as a player during the 1980s, also dismissed reports he was prepared to sell central defender Dean Richards after less than a year at White Hart Lane.

"This story is totally and utterly untrue," he said.