



Inter Milan superstar Ronaldo(C) and teammate Okan(R) put through the paces by trainer Claudio Gaudino at Pinetina on August 12.

No light at tunnel's end

Football

INTERNET, Milan

A rift between Ronaldo and his club Inter Milan showed few signs of healing on Monday as a drama worthy of a Brazilian soap opera kept fans guessing about his future. Ronaldo himself broke his silence in a newspaper interview published on Monday and while he said he considered himself with Inter "for the moment", he left little doubt about where he would prefer to play.

"My understanding of soccer is Brazilian," he told sports newspaper Il Gazzettino. "Fun and imaginative, more attacking and less tactical than (Italian football) -- more like the Spanish style than the Italian way of playing."

"Spain is on more of a human scale than Italy and Milan. It has a

different rhythm, less frenetic, more carefree," he continued. "And it has many players, like Roberto Carlos and (Zinedine) Zidane, who share my way of living our profession."

Images of a smiling Ronaldo going through his paces at the club's training ground continued to be a highlight of Inter's website, but Italian media focused on a different aspect of his workouts -- that they took place apart from most of the squad.

Ronaldo, who was omitted from a 20-man Inter squad for the Champions League match against Sporting Lisbon next week, trained separately with Turkish internationals Emre and Okan on Monday under the supervision of Inter trainer Claudio Gaudino.

The three did some muscle strengthening exercises in the gym at Pinetina before Ronaldo and Okan started their work outdoors.

They took to the pitch for athletic training. The two players did

repeated 100-metre runs with sprints and variations in speed with Gaudino watching.

In the interview with Il Gazzettino, Ronaldo suggested Real Madrid was at the negotiating table, saying "I have to evaluate Real's offer with all my attention".

Among those raising hopes of a move to Spain was his World Cup teammate Roberto Carlos, who plays for Real Madrid and on Monday accused people of "muddying" Ronaldo's image.

"The only thing I can say is that I don't understand how the top scorer in the World Cup can come back and find he's not wanted," Roberto Carlos said at Real's training ground. "If he wants to come to Real Madrid it's because he's not comfortable where he is."

"I hope he does come out and speak because there are people muddying his image," he added.

A whole new ball game

Football

REUTERS, London

Sven-Goran Eriksson's England will be looking to take out their World Cup frustration on some of the weakest teams in Europe this season when they start the long road to Portugal and the 2004 European championship.

England returned from Japan with their pride in tact -- having survived the Group of Fear, defeating old enemies Argentina along the way, and then hammering Denmark before bowing out to eventual champions Brazil in the quarter-finals.

But there was also an overwhelming sense that England had missed a chance to land football's greatest prize.

Held back by a seemingly unending run of injuries, England also paid the price for their lack of experience in the 2-1 defeat to the South Americans at Shizuoka.

Nearly two months later, Eriksson has still not digested the defeat, saying last week: "The one thing we said to the players was that with the team that we have, we should not be afraid of anyone and, if we are a little bit lucky, we could go all the way."

"I still think we could have done it," he said, echoing the sentiments of skipper David Beckham at their Awaji Island base just a day after that defeat.

Both men believe England will have gained valuable experience from the tournament -- both from the way they contained Argentina



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON

beneath the Sapporo Dome and the more painful second half against Brazil.

But now they have to start putting that experience to good use by qualifying from group seven for the finals of Euro 2004 where, injuries permitting, England will be among the favourites.

Much of the qualifying campaign will be academic, with the likes of Liechtenstein and Macedonia to play, along with the slightly trickier prospect of Slovakia, where England open their campaign on October 12 in Bratislava.

However, one team stands out as barring their path to that automatic qualification place -- Turkey, the surprise World Cup semi-finalists.

Turkey's emergence in international football, which has drawn on their progress at club level in Europe through the likes of 2000 UEFA Cup winners Galatasaray, will make topping the group a difficult task for Eriksson's men.

The trip to Turkey, England's final qualifier in October 2003, will also come three years after two Leeds United fans were stabbed to death during street brawls before a UEFA Cup tie in Istanbul against Galatasaray.

The challenge facing England before then will be to rack up maximum points in all of their qualifiers and hope the Turks drop points along the way, thereby taking some or all of the sting out that final match.

Eriksson wants England to show this season they can move up a gear after their bitter-sweet World Cup.

"It was a good lesson, but in the future I think we should say to ourselves that we should do even better," he said.

The maturing of players in the existing squad, ranging from Joe Cole and Owen Hargreaves to Steven Gerrard and Ashley Cole, will clearly help.

There is also the prospect of outsiders with real potential, such as Leeds striker Alan Smith and Blackburn midfielder David Dunn, stamping their mark on a future England side.

The pieces of the jigsaw are all there for a successful qualifying campaign at Euro 2004. What England need in the months ahead is a winning start.

Keane in trouble

Football

REUTERS, London

The English FA will wait before taking any possible disciplinary action on Manchester United captain Roy Keane's admission that he deliberately fouled Alf Inge Haaland in April last year.



THAT'S UGLY! A file photo showing Manchester United star Roy Keane stamping his studs on Manchester City's Norwegian defender Alf Inge Haaland.

Keane said in a newspaper serialisation of his new autobiography that he had deliberately targeted Manchester City's Norwegian defender in revenge for a challenge three years earlier which had ruled the Irish international out for most of the 1997-8 season.

In his book, Keane recalled: "I waited...I f***** hit him hard. Take that, you c****."

An FA statement said the gov-

erning body were in no hurry to consider disciplinary action.

"These comments have been used in newspaper serialisations of Roy Keane's forthcoming autobiography," it said.

"Having read the comments we would like to see the book in its full context before making any decision."

"However we clearly would never expect any one individual to set out to physically hurt an opponent at any level of the game."

Since the incident, for which Keane was sent off, Haaland has suffered from knee ligaments problems and made just a handful of appearances for City.

Haaland, 29, refused to say if he was going to take legal action over the comments.

"Am I going to sue? Make your own mind up," he was quoted as saying in British newspapers on Tuesday.

Haaland's club issued a statement on Tuesday expressing its concern at Keane's comments and indicating that City would be taking the matter up with the FA.

Chief operating officer Chris Bird told the club's website: "We note with concern the reported extracts from Roy Keane's book covering his foul on our player, Alfie Haaland."

"We will discuss the implications with Alfie, the various football authorities and our advisers before deciding on an appropriate response."

Roma's Egyptian awakening

Football

INTERNET, Cairo

Nearly one year after claiming a memorable 1-0 victory over Real Madrid here in Cairo, Egyptian giants Al-Ahly turned on the style to narrowly dismiss mighty Italian outfits 2-1 in a packed stadium on Sunday.

The friendly gala match, held in the Egyptian-Italian day to foster relations between both countries, was attended by a 100,000 capacity crowd at the Cairo International Stadium, and officiated by World Cup's controversial referee Gamal Al-Hadour.

The local Reds, coached by Dutchman Jo Bonfrere, shocked even their most ardent fans as they claimed a well-deserved 2-0 lead

over their visitors at the break.

But they were spared an early scare after 8 minutes when the lively French international Vincent Candela saw his 20-yard effort screaming inches off the top right corner of the home goal.

13 minutes later Ibrahim Saeed broke the deadlock from a goalmouth scramble, finding the back of the net in a crowded penalty box following a bad clearance by newly-recruited Roma defender Dellas.

With international stars Joseph Guardiola, Emerson and Tomasi lacking flair and finesse in midfield, the home side dictated the game to their counterparts in the remainder of the first-half before increasing the scoreline one minute from the break. Angolan playmaker Evelino beat the Roman keeper who misjudged a well-curved drive from

Ahmed Bilal, to tap the ball home with ease.

Argentine ace Gabriel Batistuta, who was kept quiet throughout the first 45 minutes, saw his sizzling solo run ending with keeper Issam Al-Hadhari making a fantastic interception.

Roma coach Fabio Capello made two substitutions after the restart, as the Serie A side showed signs of revival. It took them only three minutes to pull one goal back with Vincenzo Montella scoring from a penalty after Batistuta was floored by keeper El-Hadhari.

The Italian side piled on the pressure over their hosts later on, only to see the vigilant El-Hadhari denying them two clear-cut chances from long-range efforts of Candela and Emerson, as Al-Ahly held on till the end before claiming a memorable friendly victory.

Shining Silva

Football

INTERNET, London

It has taken two years, but perhaps Arsenal have finally found the man to replace Emmanuel Petit.

Gilberto Silva's shaven head could not be more different to the blond pony-tailed mane that Petit wore throughout his Highbury years.

But after he had capped an impressive display with the goal that won Arsene Wenger's side the Community Shield, the Arsenal fans left Cardiff confident the last piece in their jigsaw had been filled.

Physically strong, intelligent and controlled, the Brazilian looked the ideal foil for Patrick Vieira, the man to drop anchor and allow the new skipper to stretch his legs in attack.

No wonder that Silva's new team-mates were delighted with the impression he created.

Dennis Bergkamp, who set up the Cardiff winner, said: "At his price, he is a steal."

"The fact he was alone when he scored showed he had the strength and pace to get forward and lose the players chasing him."

"He does not get the attention a lot of his Brazilian team-mates do, but real fans know how important players like him are."

Thierry Henry, who showed no signs of a World Cup hangover, said: "He is doing well. He has just won the World Cup and mentally he looks strong."

"He is a Brazilian and we all know about Brazilians. He looked good on the ball and looked intelligent the way he was playing. The fans must be happy with him."

As was manager Wenger, and England defender Sol Campbell, who added: "Silva looks a good addition to the squad. He's a winner, he gets around the pitch and he gets tackles in."

Exactly what Arsenal want, especially if they are to finally make their mark in the Champions League.

Since Petit mistakenly decided that the grass would be greener at Barcelona's Nou Camp than Highbury, Wenger has failed to fill the void.

Ray Parlour, Gilles Grimandi, Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Edu were all given their opportunities, without ever really cementing their place.

Vieira's brilliance masked that deficiency last year, as Wenger lined up PSV Eindhoven's Mark van Bommel.

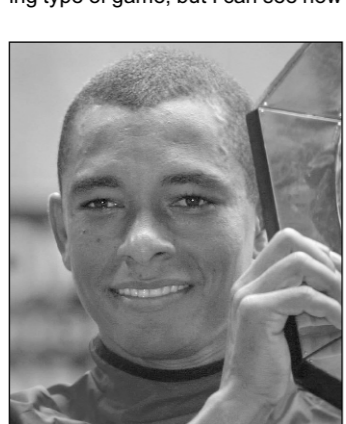
But with PSV refusing to budge from their £15million valuation, Wenger paid less than a third of that to capture the Brazil World Cup winner.

In Cardiff, that £4.5m outlay to Atletico Mineiro looked a bargain and Wenger's mood was improved by the speed with which his new import took to English football.

It has taken Edu two years to feel at home. His fellow countryman appears to be doing so in barely two weeks. Gilberto explained: "I've spoken to Edu about the problems in adapting to England. He's really helped me a lot and given me an insight into the thinking here."

"I have good expectations about playing in England. I know that it will initially mean adapting to things and learning, but I know that's what I need to do to help this team win trophies."

"Before I came here my idea of English football was that it was strong and fast-moving, a demanding type of game, but I can see now



GILBERTO SILVA

that there is a great deal of technique in the game here.

"I see a similar role for myself at Arsenal as I had with Brazil. A critical factor to me is team-work, for me to play and fulfil my role within the team. That means that my passing has to be good."

The instant understanding with Vieira was a huge plus for Arsenal. Gilberto added: "Before I came to Arsenal I didn't know much about Patrick, except that he is a great player."

"Since I've met him I've realised he's a great character and a kind person, who has already helped me on and off the pitch."

"I'm very happy to come to a team like Arsenal, not nervous at all. I will try to do my work in the best way I can, to play my part in supporting the others, as they will support me."

"Winning the World Cup has made me an even more determined player. Many players try to achieve that level. Not many do and I've achieved a dream. But I've come here to Arsenal with new goals."

Silva - who only received his work permit last week - is currently living alone in London but plans to bring his mother, father and sister over as soon as he has settled into a new home.

The 25-year-old midfielder has been no stranger to hard work in his steady climb to the top of world and club football. Silva worked in a sweet factory in order to earn a living back in his native Brazil. He then worked in a quarry and for a furniture maker before turning to football.

After playing for Brazilian sides America MG and Atletico Mineiro, he struck gold with a move to the champions of English football. But Silva last night insisted he will never forget the times when stardom seemed a world away.

He said: "My childhood was poor, like many Brazilian players."

"With every sacrifice and drop of sweat, I am achieving a better quality of life for me and my family."

"I played every minute of every game in the World Cup. And I can tell you that every minute, every move and every goal we scored was a very, very sweet experience for me."

"But that is in the past now. Arsenal is what matters. I am pleased to have made a good impression in my first game but it does not mean I will stop working hard."

The South American's natural fitness - he played throughout Brazil's World Cup campaign - is another benefit for the Gunners.

Wenger added: "He makes things simple and gets into the box at the right time. He was still surprised by the physical side of the fight but he will adapt to that quickly. He will be a strong player for us."

That strength will be key, although Henry suggested Arsenal's display in Cardiff will have sent out a message to the pretenders to their crown.

Henry said: "We looked like a team. As long as we can do that, things will be good. We still have the hunger. There is no person who wants to play on his own or who wants to hide. We try to keep it tight."

Wenger's midfield options will look even better in a couple of months when last season's heroes Freddie Ljungberg and Robert Pires are back in harness on the flanks.

Ljungberg is already working hard at Arsenal's London Colney training headquarters after his summer hip operation.

Campbell added: "When Freddie and Robert come back in November it will be like having another two new players."

"They are quality players, fantastic performers, and when you have got two top performers to come back you do get a boost."

"We are a confident squad anyway, but when you get two players of that calibre coming back during the season it is a big, big plus factor."

Ancelotti foresees glory

Football

INTERNET, Milan

"This year we'll do big things: we can win everything, the scudetto and the Champions League. AC Milan are up there with many champions as the strongest team".

These were the words of Carlo Ancelotti on the eve of their Champions League preliminary against Slovan Liberec.

With their dream addition, Alessandro Nesta definitely out of the picture, the AC Milan coach is completely concentrated on the club's first important aim of season, a Champions League meeting in which the Milan side simply cannot afford to fail.

Ancelotti knows the importance of that match, but at the same time he also knows the strengths of his team and his stars such as Rivaldo, Shevchenko, Inzaghi and Rui Costa: "We have extraordinary offensive potential and we'll have to use it in a good

way. The first test will be the Champions League preliminary in the San Siro against Slovan Liberec, and I'm sure that we'll overcome it easily also because we don't want to have any limits this season. I'm sure that this squad will give me plenty of satisfaction", Ancelotti said, also adding how, referring to last season they've made important additions.

But a clear declaration underlined his ideas: "Spectacle is important, but what counts first is winning".

Meanwhile AC Milan officially announced their jersey numbers for next season: 1 Fiori, 2 Helveg, 3 Maldini, 4 Kaladze, 5 Redondo, 7 Shevchenko, 8 Gattuso, 9 Inzaghi, 10 Rui Costa, 11 Rivaldo, 12 Dida, 13 Ba, 14 Simic, 15 Tomasson, 16 Chamot, 18 Abbiati, 20 Seedorf, 21 Piro, 22 Contra, 23 Ambrosini, 24 Laursen, 25 Roque Junior, 27 Serginho, 28 Dalla Bona, 30 Borriello, 32 Brocchi, 83 Aubameyang

More money in new Asian Champs League

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation on Tuesday launched the AFC Champions League with a 500,000-dollar cash prize for the winners, five times higher than previous Asian club competitions.

Fifty-one teams from 29 countries have entered for the tournament, which will replace the Asian Cup Championship, Asian Cup Winners Cup and the Asian Super Cup, the AFC said in a statement.

"There are huge financial incentives for clubs competing in the AFC Champions League," AFC general secretary Peter Velappan said at the launch ahead of the confederation's annual congress in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, Wednesday.

Velappan said that aside from the 500,000-dollar first prize, runners-up would receive 300,000 dollars while all other teams would be given subsidies ranging from 10,000 dollars to 100,000 dollars.

The attractive cash incentives were offered in a bid to woo greater participation in Asia-wide tournaments, and thus enhance club football in the region, the AFC said in a statement.

Velappan said the league was also created to build a new image for Asian football, and would help make the clubs stronger and more competitive.

"This competition is sure to be a winner. After the success of the World Cup ... everyone wants to invest in Asian football, everybody wants to be a part of Asian football."

FIFA President Sepp Blatter, who witnessed the launch here, said the tournament was a "great step forward for Asian football".

"As we saw at the World Cup, Asian football at an international level is on the rise. This competition will help raise the standard of club, and international football, even further," he said.

The league's opening match was to kick off Tuesday in Amman between Jordan's Al-Wihdat and Al-Nejmeh of Lebanon.

There will be four groups, two in West Asia and two in East Asia, with the winners going into the semi-finals in April.

China want Hiddink

Football

AFP, Beijing

The Chinese Football Association (CFA) has named Dutchman Guus Hiddink as their top choice to replace Bora Milutinovic as manager of the Chinese national team, state media reported Tuesday quoting a CFA source.

A coach-selecting group made up of four CFA officials has worked out a list of three candidates for the post left open after former coach Milutinovic stepped down in July, the official Xinhua news agency cited the source saying.

Hiddink recently said he would not consider coaching the Chinese team before 2004 when his contract with Dutch club PSV Eindhoven ends.

"Before 2004, I will not consider other contracts. After my contract with club PSV Eindhoven expires, that could be possible, but it's too early to discuss this issue because that is too far away," Hiddink was quoted by Xinhua as saying earlier.

But the CFA is confident of overcoming the obstacle as it has the support of Dutch-based Philips Co. Ltd, which is the largest sponsor of PSV Eindhoven, Xinhua said.

The source said that if Hiddink turns down the offer Troussier will become the most likely man for the job, while Jacquet is least possible due to lack of acquaintance with

South Korea, had been advocating the "happy soccer" philosophy since he took over the Chinese team in January, 2000.

But his "loose" training approach was always a disputable matter in the nation's soccer circle and drew heavy criticism following China's World Cup debut which ended up with three straight defeats and no goals scored, Xinhua said.

The CFA coach-selecting group believe that Hiddink's strictness would help improve the training atmosphere in the Chinese national side, said the source.

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Asian soccer. Humberto Coelho, who steered Portugal into the semifinals at Euro 2000, may turn out to be a dark horse, added the source.

Chinese media reported last month that Chinese football officials have decided to look for a high-profile overseas coach to replace Milutinovic, believing a well-qualified foreigner would be "one of the shortcuts for China to qualify for 2006 World Cup Finals."

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

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.

Asked to comment on the Chinese football team, Hiddink said the Chinese team's speed is fast and physical characteristics are also good, but it lacked large match experience.