

Big Phil's last show

Football

REUTERS, Fortaleza

Outgoing Brazil coach Luis Felipe Scolari is hoping to bow out of international soccer in style on Wednesday when his team take on Paraguay, the first game since their victorious World Cup.

But their opponents are threatening to spoil the festivities in the international friendly as they look to rebuild their squad.

"We've been invited to the party and we intend to eat most of the cake," Paraguay's caretaker coach Anibal Ruiz told reporters on Monday.

Paraguay's second round defeat against Germany in the World Cup heralded the end of an era as several key players -- including right-back Francisco Arce, central defenders Carlos Gamarra and Celso Ayala and volatile goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert -- are into their 30s.

Chilavert, reportedly not match fit, Gamarra, who wants to concentrate on winning a first-team place at Inter Milan, and injured Bayern Munich striker Roque Santa Cruz are absent while Arce, an outstanding crosser and dead-ball specialist, has announced his international retirement.

Paraguay have already found an heir apparent for Gamarra in Julio

Cesar Caceres, who last month helped his club Olimpia win the Libertadores Cup -- South America's equivalent of the Champions League.

But there are still many gaps to fill.

Ruiz, a Uruguayan who coaches the under-20 team, may be hoping that a good performance can get him the job on a permanent basis.

For Brazil, however, the biggest problem could be meeting local

PROBABLE TEAMS

Brazil: Marcos; Roque Junior, Edmilson, Anderson Polga; Cafu, Gilberto Silva, Kleberson, Ronaldinho, Roberto Carlos; Ronaldo, Rivaldo.

Paraguay: Ricardo Tavearelli; Nestor Isasi, Celso Ayala, Julio Cesar Caceres, Denis Caniza; Roberto Acuna, Carlos Bonet, Carlos Humberto Paredes, Gustavo Morinigo, Jose Cardozo, Jorge Campos.

expectations. Scolari, who led his team from crisis to World Cup victory in only 14 months, will bid farewell to a group of players he has often referred to as his family. Felipe (Big Phil), as he is popularly known, has decided he wants to spend more time with his own family and possibly pursue a career in Europe. He originally picked the same 23

players who took part at the World Cup, plus midfielder Emerson Ferreira who missed the tournament after dislocating his shoulder in training, but he has since lost midfielder Juninho and defender Lucio through injury.

The team were given a hysterical reception during a training session on Monday at the Castelao stadium but past experience has shown that the cheers could turn to insults and boos if the expected goal-feast does not materialise.

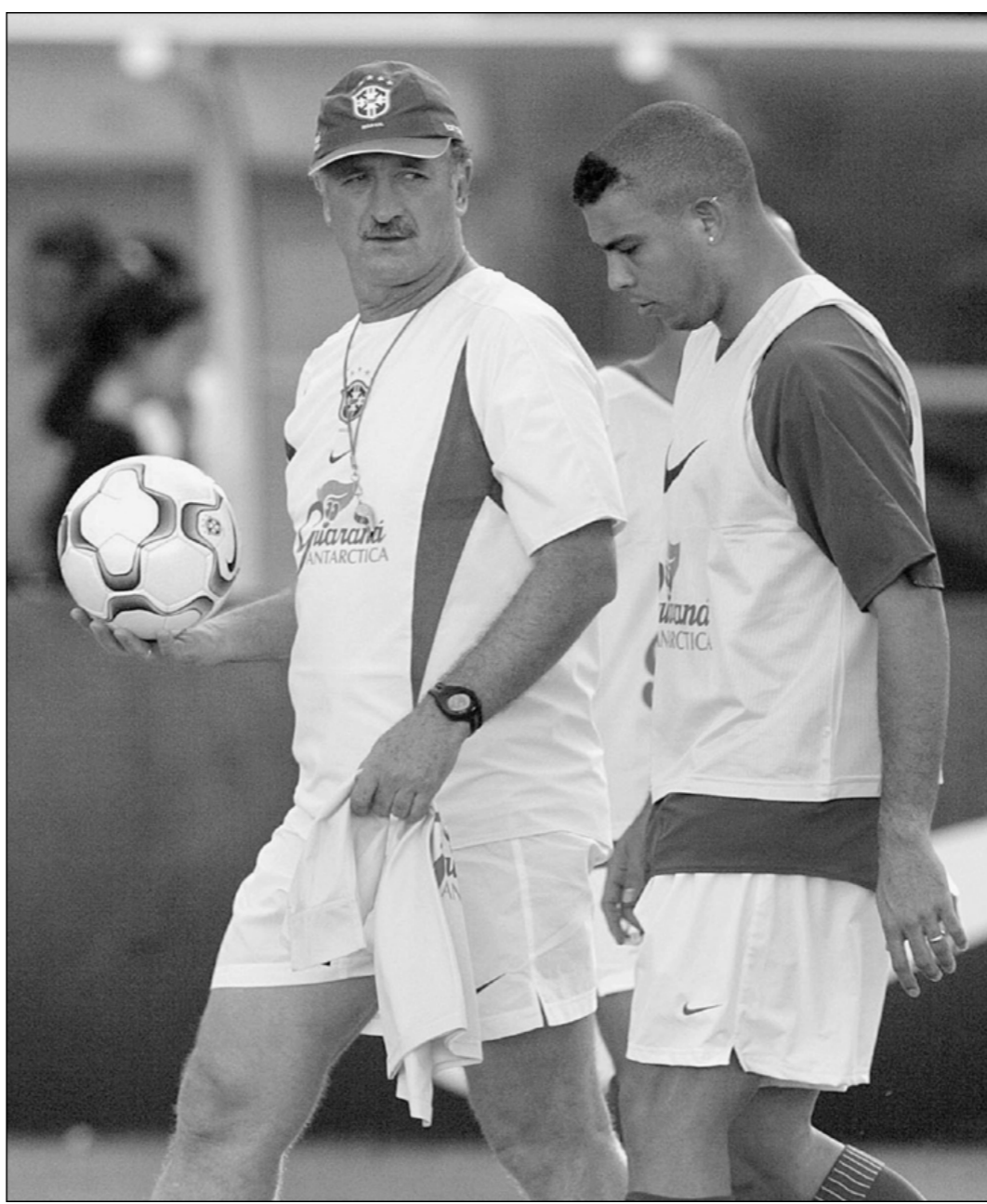
Striker Ronaldo, who has not played since the World Cup final and is in the middle of a soap-opera like saga over his future with Inter Milan, admits he is out of form and unlikely to last little more than one half.

The venue for the friendly, however, will bring back fond memories for Ronaldo and Scolari as it is where their World Cup success effectively began.

It was during the March friendly against Yugoslavia that Scolari first fielded the base of the team which went on to win all seven games in South Korea and Japan.

The game was also Ronaldo's first international after his two-and-a-half years of injury misery.

Some critics claimed Scolari was being irresponsible by gambling on Ronaldo, who went on to score eight goals in the World Cup and finish as top scorer.



WHAT'S EATING YOU? Brazil coach Luis Felipe Scolari (L) speaks with superstar Ronaldo during a training session at Fortaleza on August 20 ahead of the friendly match against Paraguay.

Understanding Ronaldo

Football

INTERNET

Brazil's victory in the World Cup was aided by questionable refereeing calls - a disputed penalty in its opener against Turkey, an annulled Belgian goal in the second round.

But the lasting effect of the Brazilians' success is much more positive than negative because of their emphasis on attacking, entertaining, and skilful play.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari encouraged defenders Edmilson, Lucio, and Roque Junior to go forward. He introduced Gilberto Silva and Kleberson to the midfield, and they contributed vibrancy and vigor. He forgave Roberto Carlos' excesses on the left side.

But the key to the 2-0 victory over Germany in the championship game June 30 in Yokohama was Ronaldo's conviction regarding instinctive play - in other words, he disobeyed orders. Scolari, like most "modern" coaches, is intent on emphasizing that all players must contribute to defending at all times.

So when Rivaldo fired a low shot at Ollie Kahn in the 67th minute, Ronaldo was supposed to be tracking into a defensive position. Instead, Ronaldo took a chance and capitalised on Kahn's bobble to score.

The significance of Ronaldo's goal cannot be overstated. This was not the most aesthetic of his 12 goals in World Cup finals competition. But it was the first meaningful goal in a title game converted by anyone in the run of play since 1986. The previous three finals had produced games that combined anti-max, overly defensive tactics, and sterility, the outcomes determined by set plays and penalty kicks.

A lesson that can be taken from this is that soccer is in good shape so long as its fate is left to the imaginations and sensibilities of the players. The problems confronting the game today derive mainly from strategies meant to stifle, plus overexercised teams, both the result of interfering agents, coaches, and sponsors.

Since the World Cup concluded, there has been relative peace in Brazilian soccer. There was a brief dispute after Scolari said injuries would prevent Ronaldo from ever returning to 100 percent, something Ronaldo yesterday called "a misunderstanding which has been resolved." Romario moved to

Fluminense and had his 99th multiple-goal game. Sao Caetano lost to Olimpia in the Copa Libertadores final. Scolari announced he would relinquish his post after the Brazil-Paraguay friendly in Fortaleza tomorrow.

Then, last week, Ronaldo - or, more likely, his agents - decided it would be better for him to leave Inter Milan for Real Madrid. Suddenly, Ronaldo was not happy with his situation. Or, more likely, his agents realized they could all be enriched by a transfer fee of dollars 40 million or so.

This was not good for Ronaldo's image. He was portrayed as ungrateful, since Inter had waited patiently for him to return after two years of injuries. Inter's president, Massimo Moratti, had also taken strong steps to limit the pull of sponsors on Ronaldo after the '98 World Cup. And Moratti had probably done the best thing for Ronaldo's image and perspective by involving him in a pet project - the Emergency non-profit's work helping land mine victims.

Moratti was being asked to "accept reality," in the words of agent Alexandre Martins. But Moratti was going to do so on his terms - asking price, 100 million euros.

This has been a strange saga, especially since it began unfolding after Rivaldo left Barcelona and was accepted so warmly by Milan. The contrast, then, was felt by Milan's rival fans at Inter, who felt betrayed by Ronaldo. Eventually, though, the cause of Ronaldo's displeasure was revealed, and the blame is being leveled at Inter coach Hector Cuper.

"Inter handled Ronie well, waited for him patiently after two risky operations," former Brazil coach Mario Zagallo was quoted as saying in yesterday's editions of La Gazzetta dello Sport. "But when Cuper did not use him immediately, and Ronaldo was completely healed, it initiated rancor against the coach. Their relationship was broken; Cuper made a mistake.

If it wasn't for the Brazilian national team, and if Scolari would not have had such blind faith in the player, we wouldn't be here now talking about the leading scorer in the World Cup.

"What Ronaldo showed in Asia is more due to the recovery effected through Brazil's friendliness than his games with Inter. Cuper showed he didn't believe in him, so Moratti must let Ronaldo go his way. The situation is very similar to that of Rivaldo: He also was not getting along with

the coach, and Barcelona made a smart choice in letting him go."

Ronaldo arrived in Fortaleza yesterday and declared, "The only thing certain is my desire to leave Inter. I have my reasons and I will tell everyone at the right time. The club knows my reasons, and I don't have to make them public."

It is also becoming certain that Ronaldo has been handled differently in recent months. The overscheduling and the excessive promotions that contributed to his breakdown four years ago have been eased. And Ronaldo's rehabilitation and training regime is being set by the trainers who know him best - Brazilians.

"Nowadays, in terms of methodology of work, Europe is way behind Brazil, but the culture of physical preparation we have developed doesn't get the credit it deserves," Selecao trainer Paulo Paixao told World Soccer magazine. "Maybe it's because we're judged in socio-economic terms, looked down upon because we're a South American country."

"Although [European clubs] have fewer games, the number of players out injured is very high. They don't seem to mind. If one player gets injured, they go out and buy another. Brazil's training methods should be taken to Europe. I'm absolutely certain that fewer players would miss games through injury."

Indeed, some Brazilian clubs play 100 games a year. National team members played full schedules and also had to return to South America for 18 World Cup qualifiers. Laterales Cafu and Roberto Carlos have been flying up and down the wings of fields all over the world for years but were still going strong on June 30.

Ronaldo took a 35-day vacation before returning to practice. He missed the team flight but arrived later in the day, and might not be available for the Paraguay match. But this seemingly will be Ronaldo's decision, indicating another change. In the past, sponsors such as Nike were accused of forcing Ronaldo to perform even when he was not prepared.

The World Cup championship game is the pinnacle of soccer's competitions and should reflect the best values of the game. There are many factors working against this happening, but thanks mostly to Ronaldo's spontaneity, this was accomplished in Yokohama. And this is what should be Ronaldo's image for the next four years.

Just pass it to Romario

Football

INTERNET

Romario continued to make football look like a cinch at the weekend. The evergreen striker scored twice for his new club Fluminense in the 3-1 defeat of Gremio on Sunday, and is proving to all and sundry that football really is as simple as he says it is.

In the run up to the Brazilian championship, which started two weeks ago, the man known affectionately as Baixinho, or 'Shorty', disseminated his opinions on Fluminense's tactical approach to the new season. All they would need, he said, were "three players who run and one or two who know they should pass the ball to me."

If that kind of analysis were true for everyone, Andy Gray and the Ubermenschen at SKY's technical departments would be out of a job. The inches and seconds with which today's football experts dissect the game ad nauseum would be instantly moribund. There are only so many red arrows that can point to

Romario.

It is lucky for Brazilian television's Mr Gray equivalent, then, that Brazilian football is 'loose', as Romario himself describes it; loose enough for the little master, the most revered man in the country of 170 million, to have scored four goals in two games - he opened up the season with a brace against Cruzeiro in front of nearly 70,000 fans at the Maracana - despite being a heavily marked man and after pre-season preparation that was, well, so characteristically Romario.



ROMARIO

He was, in case you could ever forget, embroiled throughout the summer in the drama of the World Cup selection saga. When the then national coach Luis Felipe Scolari defied a cation and omitted the Vasco da Gama player Romario, deeply affected by this snub and a split from his second wife, Danielle Favatto, by his own admission 'got fat' and lost all self-esteem.

Then, after 60 days without playing, the former Barcelona forward was signed by Rio giants Fluminense, his sixth professional club, just a couple of weeks before the start of the championship. Having shed some weight and identified his three runners and the two players who would be passing him the ball Romario was back to scoring goals in front of adoring Brazilian crowds.

After last weekend's victory Romario told besotted reporters that he had been picked by God to score goals. "When I was born, God pointed at me and said: 'That's the guy. Then he pointed at me and said: 'Go and score another goal.' And so I did." Do you have a better explanation?

Give Terry a chance

Football

AFP, London

A Chelsea footballer accused of attacking a bouncer with a bottle during a nightclub fight has "the great prizes of sporting life" waiting for him "just around the corner", a court was told here Tuesday.

John Terry, 21, brought joy to thousands through his skills and one day may bring glory to the national team, a jury at Middlesex Guildhall Crown Court was told.

Terry, a former England under-21 captain, is accused of attacking bouncer Trevor Thirlwall with a glass bottle when a fight erupted at a private members' nightclub in west London.

He denies wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm and possessing a bottle as an offensive weapon.

Keane to know in September

AFP, London

Manchester United captain Roy Keane will discover early in September whether or not he will face disciplinary action and a possible suspension following his controversial autobiography.

The Irishman is likely to be charged with misconduct by the Football Association (FA) after his apparent admission that he targeted Manchester City's Alf Inge Haaland for revenge in a now-infamous tackle in April last year.

If he is found guilty of bringing the game into disrepute, he could then face a suspension of up to four matches.

The FA have come under pressure to bring the matter to a head given that it has dominated the football world since the book was serialised earlier this month.

great prizes of sporting life are just around the corner.

"But that future and that life is in your hands", he told the jury of eight women and four men.

"I invite you on the evidence you have heard to lift from that young man's shoulders the burden of these allegations, largely false, so that he might return to the game he loves, to bring by his play joy to the thousands who watch the game and hopefully one day the glory of his national team."

"In reality this young man has got the world at his feet", De Silva said.

"His ability to serve his club and his country and to win for himself the



THAT WAS SATISFYING! Argentine legend Diego Maradona leaves a Buenos Aires courthouse on August 20 after attending the sentencing of Argentine Judge Hernan Bernasconi, who sentenced Maradona's associate and manager Guillermo Coppola to prison on drug charges. Bernasconi was sentenced to nine years six months of prison for falsifying evidence.

Bielsa retained

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina have finally renewed the contract of coach Marcelo Bielsa despite his team's first round exit at the World Cup, an Argentine Football Federation (AFA) official said.

"Bielsa has signed the contract," said Jose Luis Meiszner, a member of the three-man committee which has been negotiating with the reclusive coach, after an AFA meeting on Tuesday night.

Bielsa, the only candidate for the job after former under-20 coach Jose Pekerman ruled himself out of contention last month, has been on the point of signing a new contract for nearly a month. He is due to give a news conference next week.

Bielsa becomes the third Argentina coach to stay on after a World Cup finals but the first to do so after failing to win the tournament. Cesar Luis Menotti, in 1978, and Carlos Bilardo, eight years later, both won soccer's top prize.

The brooding, eccentric 47-year-old Bielsa kept his job on the strength of his team's performances over the previous four years.

Argentina won the South American World Cup qualifying group, losing only once in 18 games, and also beat Italy and



MARCELO BIELSA

Germany away in friendly internationals.

Local media said that Bielsa will be in charge for the qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup and his contract would be automatically extended to include the tournament itself if Argentina qualify.

He is expected to take a significant wage cut for his second stint. Bielsa had admitted before the World Cup that coming second in South Korea and Japan would be seen as a failure in Argentina.

In the event, his team were eliminated at the first hurdle, finishing third in a tough group, which also included England, Sweden and Nigeria.

On returning home, Bielsa isolated himself on a farm deep in the province of Santa Fe.

Raul's arm-band honour

Football

REUTERS, Budapest

Real Madrid striker Raul says his appointment as Spain captain will not signal a change in his approach to Wednesday's friendly against Hungary.

"For me it is a real honour to be made captain at 25-years-old, but the responsibility remains exactly the same as before," the prolific striker told reporters at a news conference in Budapest.

"All I aim to do is to keep the team united, ensure there is a good atmosphere and that we are all able to enjoy ourselves."

Coach Inaki Saez, who will be taking charge of the national side for the first time since replacing Jose Antonio Camacho last month, said it was easy to explain why he had chosen Raul as his new captain.

"He has played more internationals than anyone else in the side, and apart from his charisma and quality he is the archetypal professional who is always trying to improve, score more goals and push himself to the limit," he said on Tuesday.

Raul succeeds club team mate



RAUL

Fernando Hierro, who retired from international football after the World Cup.

The nimble striker has scored 28 goals in 55 appearances for Spain, one less than Hierro who heads the list of all-time scorers for the national team.

Raul added that he was looking forward to leading a remodelled squad that includes a host of young players and five new caps.

"A new cycle has begun," he said. "We are all really excited about it. The new players, new coach and all of us involved are keen to make sure that people can feel proud of the national team."

Serie A & B two weeks late

Football

AFP, Milan

The start of Italy's First and Second division football leagues has been put back two weeks in a dispute over television rights.

The unprecedented decision to delay the opening of the Serie A and Serie B leagues until September 15 was relayed by Gino Corioni, president of Brescia, after a meeting between league and club officials here Tuesday.

Brescia is one of a group of eight Serie A and three Serie B clubs currently without any broadcast arrangements with pay-per-view stations Stream and Telepiu - the others are Atalanta, Chievo, Piacenza, Perugia, Como, Modena, Empoli (all Serie A) and in Serie B - Verona, Venezia and Vicenza.

The move to postpone the kick-off of the 2002/03 season was taken

unanimously by the 18 Serie A presidents in a rare gesture of solidarity.

"It's a very positive day for our football which will be strengthened by this," declared Adriano Galliani, the Italian league chief and vice-president of AC Milan.

The 11 'outcasts' are hoping to use the extra time afforded by the postponement to try to secure a deal with the two private television stations.

"The clubs without contracts can now try to finalise their plans," noted Galliani.

This is the first time the Italian league has been delayed in this manner, although the 2000 season started a month late because of the Sydney Olympics.

The out-of-contract sides have formed a consortium, Plus Media Trading, headed by Enrico Bendoni. He warned: "The championship, in its actual state, will be damaged, with no television coverage for some teams."

Cisse's red turns yellow

Football

AFP, London

Senegal captain Aliou Cisse has had the red card he received while playing for English Premiership new boys Birmingham against champions Arsenal on Sunday rescinded by referee Mike Riley.

Cisse was sent off by Riley for a second bookable offence at Highbury following a tackle on England full-back Ashley Cole. But Riley has now chalked off the red card after studying video evidence.

A statement on the FA website

Tuesday said: "Following the Arsenal versus Birmingham match on Sunday, match referee Mike Riley has reviewed the sending off of Aliou Cisse.

"He has decided that the tackle was careless and warranted a free-kick rather than reckless which he thought at the time and has asked that the second caution should not be issued.

"Therefore it has been agreed that the player will have a caution recorded against him for the first offence and will not have to serve a one-match suspension."

Arsenal beat Birmingham 2-0, their goals scored by France internationals Thierry Henry and Sylvain Wiltord.

Sporting, Barca deny Jardel rumours

AFP, Lisbon

Sporting Lisbon and Barcelona denied on Tuesday that Brazilian striker Mario Jardel, seeking a fresh start after the break up of his marriage, was set to quit Portugal for the Catalan club.

In a joint statement published on Sporting's website the clubs rejected media reports of recent days which stated that Barca hoped to capture the 28-year-old former Porto star on a four-year contract.

The statement said that the two outfits' presidents - Barca's Joan Gaspart and Sporting's Miguel Ribeiro Telles - had met, however, over the past week to "analyse the possibility of certain transactions" between the two.

Rivaldo at future's cross-roads

Football

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo is ready to bring the curtain down on his international career later on Wednesday, according to local press reports.

The 30-year-old AC Milan star, who helped guide Brazil to their fifth World Cup triumph in the summer, said that he was growing tired of the pressure from supporters and the criticisms of his performances.

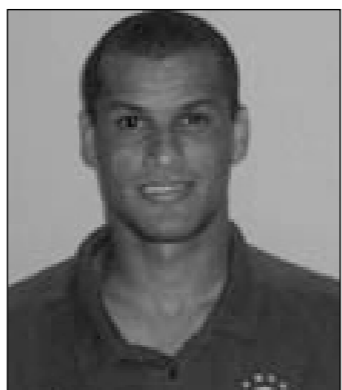
"First of all, I have to know whether the next coach of the national team will call me into the squad," said Rivaldo ahead of Wednesday's friendly with Paraguay in Fortaleza.

"If that is the case, then I will need to seriously think about my decision."

The former Barcelona player also

said that it was time for the national team to think about giving younger players a chance in the big time.

Wednesday's match with Paraguay will be the last one for coach Luiz Felipe Scolari who is stepping down from the job having achieved his goal of World Cup glory.



RIVALDO