



PHOTO: AFP

IN HIS ELEMENTS: Superstar Ronaldo (L) leaves Olimpia goalkeeper Ricardo Javier Tavarelli in his wake during their Intercontinental Cup match at Yokohama International Stadium on December 3.

Tailor-made for Ronaldo

Football

REUTERS, Yokohama

Yokohama has proved a happy hunting ground again for Ronaldo as his 14th minute opener paved the way for Real Madrid to beat Olimpia of Paraguay 2-0 in the World Club Cup.

Ronaldo, who scored both goals when Brazil beat Germany 2-0 in the World Cup final in June in his last appearance at International Stadium, brought a crowd of 66,000 to life with a superb finish to set the tone for a one-sided match.

"Maybe this is a lucky stadium for me but I think you have to make that luck for yourself. What is important is for Real to take this victory and this kind of form back to the Bernabeu," he told reporters.

Despite having added the World Club Cup to the Champions League and European Super Cup titles they have won in their centenary year, Real have slipped to seventh in La Liga and trail leaders Real Sociedad by eight points.

But Ronaldo, who had been struggling with a 'flu bug over the past week, gave Real an instant lift against Olimpia with a clinical strike to round off a three-man move

involving Roberto Carlos and Raul. A left-wing cross from the overlapping Roberto Carlos was cleverly dummed by Raul, allowing man-of-the-match Ronaldo to bury a right-foot shot from just inside the box.

"I had the same sort of motivation today as I did before the World Cup final. It was a different type of game but you need those pre-match nerves in a big game like this," said Ronaldo, who won his first trophy with Real since his dollars 44 million move from Inter Milan in September.

"Hopefully we can win the Champions League again this season and come back to Japan for the World Club Cup again."

Real team mate Luis Figo, who set up the second goal for substitute Guti in the 84th minute, agreed that Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos had been the difference as Real erased the memory of the 2-1 defeat to Argentina's Boca Juniors two years ago.

"What can I say? They are both great players and I think everyone saw their quality tonight," said Figo. "Maybe Ronaldo could have scored a couple more goals but we achieved what we set out to do, so we have to be happy."

The nine-times European champions won the World Club Cup in 1998 with a 2-1 victory over Vasco

da Gama of Brazil. Real also won the inaugural title in 1960, when the competition was played over two legs. It was replaced by a one-match format in 1980.

"This is a very special victory in our centenary season. Real are not just a collection of star players. It was a true team effort tonight and this win will give our season a big lift," said Real manager Vicente del Bosque.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez believes that victory was as important to the club's global marketing strategy as it was to its sporting fortunes.

For Perez, the image projected by the club, will play a vital role in boosting its sales of merchandise in the Asian market.

"This third World Club Cup will do a lot to increase the prestige and universal appeal of Real Madrid," Perez told Spanish media after the match.

"The important thing was not just to win it, but to have won it the way we did by giving an exhibition of entertaining and attacking football."

"From a business perspective this game was tremendously important because it strengthens our image in the Asian zone, which is becoming an increasingly important market for us."

Al Qaeda targets football?

REUTERS, Rome

Italian police said they were unaware of any planned Al Qaeda attack on Israel's soccer team last October, contradicting an Israeli newspaper report that Italy helped foil the plan through last-minute arrests.

Mass circulation daily Yedioth Ahronoth said the attack had been intended to take place during a European Championship qualifier in Malta on October 12 but was prevented when a Tunisian on the island was arrested on an Italian tip-off.

"I am unaware that there was any planned strike on the Israeli soccer team," Giampaolo Ganzer, head of the Italian police unit that dismantled a suspected Al Qaeda cell in the week preceding the soccer match, told Reuters.

"We knew of no imminent attack when we made those arrests."

Ganzer's unit said on October 11 it had arrested four Tunisian men in Italy on suspicion of preparing attacks on unspecified targets in Europe. A Tunisian man was seized in Malta and extradited to Italy as part of the same operation.

Judicial sources in Milan close to the investigation into dozens of suspected militants arrested in Italy in the past year said they too were unaware of any planned attack on Israel's soccer squad.

There was no mention of any plans to attack Israelis in the 150-page arrest warrant issued by Italian justice officials, legal sources told

Reuters.

Israeli national soccer coach Avraham Grant told Israeli Army radio the team managers were warned by Israeli security officials that a Tunisian citizen connected to Al Qaeda had been arrested.

"I think a day before the game, they arrested a person connected to Al Qaeda," Grant said. "(At the time) we didn't understand that there was a specific warning. We did not realise they planned an attack."

Yedioth Ahronoth quoted a "security source in Rome" as saying that Italian officials were investigating the possibility the suspected Al Qaeda operatives had been planning an attack against the Israeli soccer team in Malta.

The newspaper said the Italian secret service was tipped off about the impending attack after overhearing a telephone conversation in which one suspect said: "Everything is ready for the game. The ground is ready. We will win".

The newspaper provided no further details.

Al Qaeda is suspected of being behind the U.S. suicide bombings as well as a failed attempt to fire missiles at an Israeli airliner in Mombasa in Kenya last Thursday and the suicide bombing of a nearby Israeli-owned hotel minutes later.

Ten Kenyans, three Israelis and three suicide bombers were killed in that attack. Two of the Israelis were children.

Italian Cup

Milan held

Football

AFP, Rome

Former Argentina international Fernando Redondo made his long-awaited debut for AC Milan in a 1-1 draw with Serie B side Ancona in the first leg of their Italian Cup third round tie on Tuesday.

It was the South American's first appearance for the 'Rossoneri' since damaging knee ligaments shortly after his 11-million-dollar move from Real Madrid in August 2000.

Redondo played for the first 45 minutes before being substituted by Andrea Pirlo after the break.

"The knee felt fine and it was nice to get a run out," he told RAI television.

"I just need a few games to build up my fitness."

Leonardo, who made a shock return to Milan in October at the age of 33, scored Milan's leveller from close range on the stroke of half-time after Ancona had taken a fifth minute

Sukur signs for Rovers

AFP, London

Turkey's all-time leading scorer Hakan Sukur has signed a contract with English Premiership side Blackburn Rovers that will take him through until the end of the season.

The 31-year-old has been without a club since being released from his contract at Italian club Parma and will arrive at Ewood Park as a free agent.

That means there is no fee involved and he is free to play when fit although the club have confirmed he is currently carrying an injury.

"I am delighted Hakan is joining us," said Rovers manager Graeme Souness. "I know what he is capable of, having worked with him before."

"He is a natural athlete and will provide us with something different. He is carrying a slight injury at the moment but that has been taken into account and we are confident he will strengthen our squad."

Sukur, who has a groin injury, worked with Souness at Turkish club Galatasaray. Rovers coaches Phil Boersma and Dean Saunders were also there at the time, along with players Tugay and Brad Friedel.

He is idolised in Turkey where he picked up the nickname of the "Bull of the Bosphorus" for his muscular, all-action style.

But he was surprisingly in poor form during the summer's World Cup finals even though the Turks exceeded all expectations by reaching the semi-finals.

Dare dribble in Brazil!

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilians are already beginning to worry about the future of 18-year-old striker Robinho after a rival player warned that his dribbling skills could lead him to suffer serious injury.

Robinho is regarded as one of the most promising Brazilian players to have emerged in the last few years and has been the inspiration in the Santos team which has reached the semi-finals of the Brazilian championship despite an average age of only 23.

On Sunday, he tormented the Gremio defence with his trademark dribbles, inspiring his team to a 3-0 win in the first leg of their tie and provoking Gremio defender Anderson Polga, a member of Brazil's World Cup squad, into getting sent off for two bookable offences.

But the mood turned sour after the game when Gremio goalkeeper Danrlei accused Robinho of "anti-football" and warned that he could end up with a serious injury.

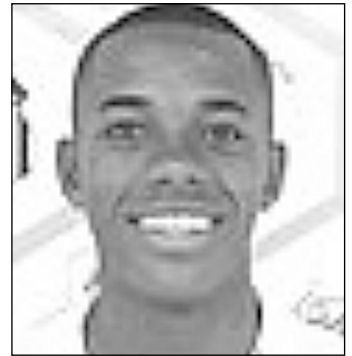
"Players get angry when they get dribbled all the time," said Danrlei. "He could end up having his leg broken."

Danrlei later insisted that his comments had been merely advice but Brazilian media interpreted

them as a threat -- especially as Santos still have to travel to Gremio for Wednesday's second leg.

Robinho, whose style is often likened to that of Brazil's World Cup winger Denilson, remained upbeat and defiant at the same time.

"I'm not changing my style," he said. "Danrlei didn't mean what he



ROBINHO

said. He was still angry at the defeat."

But the signs are not good. Paradoxically, while the Brazil national team has an unequalled reputation for flowing, attacking football, the country's domestic football is among the most violent in the world.

Brazilian matches produce an average of around 60 fouls and referees are repeatedly accused of showing tolerance towards violent play, while booking players for

dissent and retaliation.

Critics say that Brazil has roundly ignored FIFA's campaign for fair play and ignored directives to clamp down on the tackle from behind.

Earlier this year, referee Leonardo Gaciba caused outrage when he booked Coritiba striker Jaba for dummying and dribbling. Gaciba penalised the player with a free kick, claiming he was provoking opponents and risking injury.

Brazilian players regard being dribbled or having the ball flicked through their legs as a humiliation -- and even an insult to their manhood. In October, a Second Division match was abandoned in the last minute when a player was chased off the pitch by opponents after nonchalantly playing keep-up during the game.

On Tuesday, one Brazilian newspaper wondered whether Robinho would join the list of players such as Pele, Zico and Garrincha, whose careers were all plagued by injuries caused by violent tackles.

Zico never fully recovered from a knee injury caused by horrendous tackle during a game between Flamengo and Bangu in 1985.

Garrincha frequently had to play with painkillers and Brazilians still remember angrily the way in which Pele was kicked out of the 1966 World Cup in England after being on the wrong end of a horrendous double-foul during a match against Portugal.

Job has a cracked skull

Football

AFP, London

Middlesbrough's Cameroon striker Joseph-Desire Job suffered a cracked skull in a clash of heads with West Brom defender Darren Moore last weekend, the Premiership club confirmed Tuesday.

The accident took place during Boro's 1-0 defeat at the Hawthorns on Saturday, as Job, who turned 25 on Sunday, competed for a high ball. He was stretched over the pitch, having lost consciousness but came around sufficiently to talk to manager Steve McClaren before being taken to hospital.

Job stayed in hospital overnight before being taken back to the north-east for further tests on

Monday.

"Joseph saw a neuro-surgeon yesterday and further scans revealed that he had a slight crack on the base of his skull," said a Boro spokesman on Tuesday.

"He therefore requires complete rest and will not be training for the present time."

"The situation will be reassessed in about 10 days' time."

McClaren added: "It's a big blow for us, but it does create an opportunity for another player to come in and stake a claim."

"Naturally, the most important issue right now is Joseph's health, and we will of course follow the medical advice and give him complete rest."

Job has been in good form so far this season adapting well to his free role behind the strikers and linking particularly well in midfield with

compatriot and close friend Geremi.

But he might not have been playing in that position had not Brazil's Juninho damaged knee ligaments just days after returning to his former club.

Not that Job was overawed by the prospect of Juninho taking his place.

"Even though I'm not scoring at the moment, I'm not worried that Juninho will be coming back soon," he said recently.

"We may be challenging for the same position, but I just focus on my own performance, because if I play well, then there will be no problem."

"In football anything can happen, so there's no point in worrying about it. If I'm playing well then I hope to get picked."

"Obviously I'd like to be scoring more goals for the team, but as long as the team is scoring, that's all that matters."

English League Cup

Forlan again

Football

AFP, London

Diego Forlan was on target again as Manchester United advanced into the quarter-finals of the English League Cup on Tuesday with a 2-0 win away to First Division Burnley.

Forlan's first-half goal, following his weekend double against Liverpool, and substitute Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's strike after the interval, took Alex Ferguson's side a step closer to winning a trophy United have claimed just once in their history, back in 1992.

United's manager was well pleased with his team's efforts. "We showed a lot of fight against a team who gave everything," Ferguson told Sky Sports.

"They made it a real Cup tie," added the Scot, who admitted to being concerned by Burnley's first half display.

Ferguson's decision to stand by Forlan looks to be reaping its reward, with Tuesday's goal the Uruguayan's fifth in six games.

"He was all over the pitch. That shows you what the confidence of a goal can do," said Ferguson. Coming after Sunday's 2-1 win over title rivals Liverpool and ahead of Saturday's title showdown with champions and league leaders Arsenal, this was just the result Ferguson wanted to maintain the team's confidence.

Arsene Wenger's team, unlike United, do not have a midweek match but Ferguson denied this

gave the Londoners an advantage.

"Arsenal might think that but when you are winning games that gives you confidence too," he said.

But it was a different story for Premiership strugglers Sunderland, beaten 2-0 by First Division Sheffield United.

Two goals in two second-half minutes from Shaun Murphy and Wayne Allison secured the Yorkshire club's entry into the fifth round for the first time since 1972.

It was a particularly sweet victory for the bulk of the Bramall Lane crowd as Sunderland boss Howard Wilkinson used to play for and manage United's arch rivals Sheffield Wednesday.

In the evening's other League Cup match Crystal Palace of the First Division beat Second Division Oldham 2-0.

Tommy Black scored twice for the south London club, who saw Danny Granville sent off for a two-footed tackle in first-half injury time.

At Turf Moor, Burnley had several chances in the first half through Gareth Taylor.

He twice saw efforts go narrowly wide of Roy Carroll's right post, the first after 55 seconds, when he had been played in by Robbie Blake, who also provided the ammunition for Taylor's second effort.

However, United's class eventually told in the 35th minute. John O'Shea's superb pass split the Burnley defence who'd been living dangerously by trying to play the offside trap.

But the linesman's flag, correctly, stayed down and Forlan, whose name had become a byword

for poor finishing earlier in the season when he was in the midst of a goal drought, calmly steered the ball past Beresford after being left one-on-one with the keeper.

Burnley almost levelled in the 42nd minute when Ireland keeper Carroll, one of six changes to the side that beat Liverpool, alertly tipped over Taylor's header from a Lee Briscoe corner.

O'Shea should have put United 2-0 up in first-half stoppage time but, having cleverly lost his marker, he wastefully steered his unopposed header from Michael Stewart's free-kick well wide of the left upright.

Burnley, continued to press forward but at the other end United youngster Danny Pugh, making his first senior start, should have scored in the 58th minute.

Forlan's flick on found Norway international Solskjaer, who had replaced van Nistelrooy at half-time.

The supersub unselfishly squared the ball to Pugh but with just Beresford to beat he sidefooted the ball wide.

But seven minutes later the 'baby-faced assassin' showed Pugh how it should be done.

Chadwick's pull-back found Solskjaer at the top of the area and his fierce strike into the roof of the net gave Beresford no chance.

Ryan Giggs had a chance to make it 3-0 in the dying minutes but Beresford blocked his strike when the Wales star was clean through and then saved Pugh's follow-up.

Players protest in Italy

AFP, Rome

Football matches in Italy this weekend will start 15 minutes later than scheduled because of a protest by the Italian Players' Association (AIC).

The AIC are becoming increasingly concerned following the violent attacks on Messina goalkeeper Emanuele Manitta and Napoli captain Francesco Baldini.

Before this weekend's matches in Serie A, B and C, the captains of each home team will read an official statement asking to put a stop to the violence.

Di Canio out of action

Football

AFP, London

West Ham United's star striker Paolo di Canio could be out of action for several weeks after sustaining a bad knee injury in Monday's 1-0 league defeat to Southampton.

The Hammers' official website said the Italian faces "an extended lay-off" with newspaper reports suggesting he could be out for

anything between six weeks and three months.

However, it appears the Upton Park talisman will definitely miss the away games at Middlesbrough on Saturday and Manchester United on December 14.

Di Canio flew out to Italy Tuesday morning to get a second opinion on whether he needs an operation.

"The doctor had said to me at half-time during the match against Southampton that it would be better if I opted out," he said.

"But I said I wanted to play on

and give what I can to the team. The problem was I couldn't run, or challenge for the ball."

Under-fire manager Glenn Roeder admits di Canio's injury was another thing for the Premiership's bottom club and their fans to worry about.

He told the club's official website www.whufc.com: "There are not enough hours in the day."

"I don't think anyone on the staff had much sleep after the Southampton game - and I don't suppose our supporters did, either."