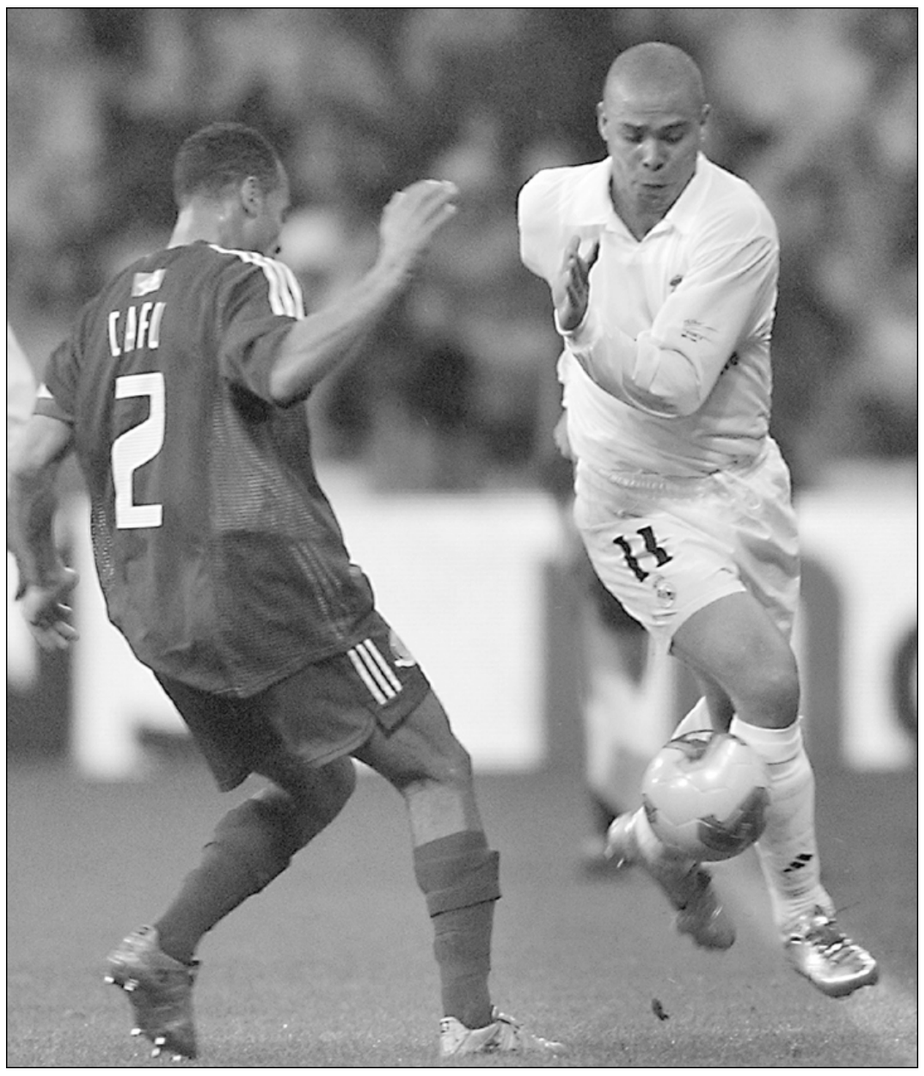


PHOTO:AFP

PATRIOTISM CAN WAIT! Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo (R) going past the challenge of compatriot Cafu of the FIFA World XI during the Real Madrid Centenary match in Madrid on December 18.

'You are nothing without your teammates'

After being awarded FIFA World Player of the year 2002 for the third time (1996, 1997 and 2002), Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo faced the press on Wednesday in his very own humble style and answered every question with trademark honesty and modesty. Folowing are the excerpts of the Phenomenon's press conference:

Football

INTERNET, *Madrid*

Question (Q): Despite not being 100% fit all the season, did you expect this nomination?

Ronaldo (R): I started to consider it feasible after the World championship. When you do a top-class performance at such an important competition, it is easy to win this sort of awards. I am very glad to be a candidate.

Q: What is your assessment of this year 2002?

R: It is very positive. It has been a fantastic year and I would like to dedicate this nomination to those who made it possible: Inter, Brazil and, of course, Real Madrid. I have felt at ease ever since I got to the Spanish capital, though, at first, it was hard for me to adapt to my teammates. Madrid is a fantastic city, although the traffic made me being 45 minutes late for the press conference today, I apologise.

Q: How do you feel standing side by side with Oliver Kahn?

R: It's good. The World Cup final is still in everybody's memory. All I can say is that I already lived this experience in 1998 with Zidane.

Q: Did you ever imagine you could be part of this sort of awards again?

R: It has been a very tough year and it is an honour for me to be here. I got over my injuries, as well as all the doubts and uncertainties about my comeback. All the work I have done this year is now being rewarded with all the prizes I am receiving.

Q: Is it fair that Roberto Carlos is not a candidate for this award?

R: I am not the one who decides the winners. The only thing I know is that Roberto Carlos is really glad for me, and so would I, if the case was the opposite. I try to do my job the best that I can and I am hopeful about winning more and more titles.

Q: What role has Scolari played in this great final stretch of season you had?

R: He trusted me when I had not yet recovered and he told me he would include me in the team. It was very important in the final stretch of my recovery. I will always be thankful to him for all his trust in my play. Everybody, particularly the coach, expected me to play with Brazil again.

Q: Do you agree with the absence of Italian players for the top awards?

R: Vieri is the Italian player I like best. The only thing they can do now is to give five Golden Shoes and five World Player Awards next season, that will make everybody happy. All the prizes are very important, and all the winners are satisfied. But, you are nothing without your teammates, that's for sure.

Q: After your success at individual level, what are your expectations at team level?

R: We are going to fight for all the competitions. The Champions League and the Spanish *Liga* are our objectives right now, and I think we are capable of winning both of them.

Q: You have has always been very committed with society. Are you worried about the increase of violence?

R: Unfortunately, what is happening at the stadiums is horrible and it is damaging our sport. Football is very beautiful thing, you just have to go to the field and enjoy yourself.

Q: Besides violence, there is another big problem in football nowadays: doping.

R: We players have to get rid of these things. There are some footballers that try to cheat taking these substances. For me, thank God, the people that are by my side have never let me down, they take good care of me.

Q: Which of the three squads you have played in this season must get the most credits for all the prizes you have been receiving lately?

R: I cannot mention only one of them, they all have been very important..

Q: How do you feel being Zidane's teammate?

R: We are getting to know each other better as days go on. At the training, we do things that later on at the match might not work out, but we have a good time. I think I am falling in love with him (laughter).

Q: Who would you like to dedicate the FIFA World Player Award to?

R: To many people, I don't want to forget anybody, but, especially, to the medical team that have been working with me over the past two years. I don't want to forget my family, friends, the media...everybody.

Cuper has no doubt

Football

INTERNET

Although FIFA have named Ronaldo as their World Player of the Year for the unprecedented third time, there are some who believe it is not justified.

Astonishingly, he receives support from the most unexpected of quarters - his old coach at FC Internazionale Milan no less. He left Inter in the summer with rumours that his relationship with the Nerazzurri's Argentine manager, Hector Cuper, was more than a little strained. However, Cuper has congratulated Ronaldo: "It's a very prestigious award and Ronaldo is rightly proud. My compliments to him, " he said.

When asked if he thought Ronaldo deserved to win the Ballon d'Or, Cuper said Ronaldo was had every right to have it.

"There's a commission that evaluates everything. I would have given it to the other two as well. Ronaldo has done two important things to deserve this recognition.

"Ronaldo scored eight goals in the World Cup. He returned to playing with Inter, then he also won the Intercontinental Cup with Real Madrid... He has won some very important things. I think he deserves this award and I'm pleased that he's won it."

But the voices of gloom are closer to home than Ronaldo would like. His coach during World Cup 2002, Luis Felipe Scolari, made his choice abundantly clear as to whom he thought should receive FIFA's top prize, voting for David Beckham as his choice. But then again it was

HECTOR CUPER

Scolari who told reporters after Brazil had captured their fifth world crown that Ronaldo "was - how can we say it - a spoilt player."

It is not just Scolari who has joined the anti-Ronaldo bandwagon. His current club boss, Vicente Del Bosque has also harboured doubts over the Brazilian's prowess. "These are prizes that are more for publicity than anything else and in many cases they are totally distanced from football," he said. "I wouldn't just give the Golden Ball to Ronaldo but also to many other players besides - among them Raul."

Of course there are those who simply believe that others are more deserving of these awards. Arsenal forward Thierry Henry has claimed the prize should have gone to Germany's midfielder Michael Ballack: "Over the year, I wouldn't put Ronaldo in with my favourites. He deserves the prize if it is judged on the World Cup alone - but it is supposed to be for the whole year," he said. "The prize is given for the period from December to December. Ballack was consistent for the whole season."

Even the man himself has said that there were perhaps more worthy candidates: "I think Roberto Carlos deserved it as much as I did. He has had a great season. He has won almost everything from the European Cup to the World Cup and the World Club Cup [with Real]. He is an outstanding player," said Ronaldo, before adding: "Kahn and Ballack deserved it too. But I guess it's a little bit difficult for a goalkeeper and Ballack did not play in the World Cup final [because of suspension]."

Grand Real party

Football

REUTERS, *Madrid*

Real Madrid's centenary year celebrations ended on a high note when the team fought back from 3-0 down to draw 3-3 with a World Selection in an ultimately thrilling friendly at a rainswept Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

The downpour did not dampen the spirits of the Real fans, who had come to cheer newly crowned world and European Footballer of the Year Ronaldo who played alongside Zinedine Zidane, the French playmaker who finished second in the global award.

The Bernabeu crowd also chanted the name of Pedraj Mijatovic, the Yugoslav who scored the winning goal when Real won the European Cup in 1998.

Mijatovic made a brief appearance as a second-half substitute for the World Select team which featured a mouth-watering lineup including Michael Ballack, Paolo Maldini, Roberto Baggio, Cafu, Hidetoshi Nakata, Rivaldo and Miroslav Klose, although German goalkeeper Oliver Kahn pulled out with an injury.

Real's younger and bit-part players battled back superbly after their stars had been substituted, throwing everything at the visitors as the match became more intense and competitive with Real searching desperately for the equaliser.

It finally came three minutes from the end when Esteban Cambiasso scored with a brilliantly struck curling shot from the edge of the box to give the reigning World Club and European champions a well deserved draw after creating eight clear-cut chances in the last 20 minutes.

The World Selection took the lead after 30 minutes with a superbly executed header from Klose, who scored five goals for Germany in the World Cup finals.

He connected with a perfectly flighted cross from the still-impressive Baggio wide on the left, getting to the ball before both defender Ivan Helguera and goalkeeper Ilker Casillas and making no mistake with his diving header.

A minute later both Baggio and Klose were among the first of the visitors' substitutions and the young Brazilian sensation Kaka, who replaced Baggio, doubled their lead two minutes before the break.

He drifted unchallenged past three Real defenders before side-footing past substitute goalkeeper Cesar from the edge of the box.

Real created several promising openings in the first half but Ronaldo was kept firmly in check by Rafael Marquez and Maldini in the visitors' defence and apart from a chance for Raul after five minutes and Luis Figo eight minutes later, Real never looked like scoring.

Despite the pouring rain, a halftime break extended to 26 minutes was enlivened by opera singer and Real fan Placido Domingo's rendition of the club's hymn, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra and flanked by the two teams.

The players then had to wait several minutes in the rain while the musicians, in full evening dress, trooped off with their instruments and stage set.

Three minutes after the break Aliou Cisse made it 3-0 after more good work from Kaka, who played in the Senegalese midfielder to shrug off Real's substitute defender Borja and lift the ball past keeper Cesar.

Real pulled one goal back on the hour mark as Santiago Solari swept in from the penalty spot after Portillo was held by Murat Yakin as he attempted to reach a Fernando Morientes cross.

Tote further reduced the arrears with a simple tap-in on 65 minutes after Albano Bizarri failed to hold Portillo's shot.

There than followed a furious finale which eventually provided Real with an equaliser.

English League Cup

MU-L'pool final on the cards

Football

AFP, *London*

Favourites Manchester United and Liverpool were kept apart for the semi-finals of the English League Cup following the draw made here on Wednesday night.

Holders Blackburn Rovers will face Manchester United in the semi-finals over two legs with Liverpool's dramatic 4-3 quarter-final win over Aston Villa earning them a meeting with Sheffield United.

Liverpool will start the two-legged semi-final as strong favourites but the Blades have already cut down Premiership sides Leeds and Sunderland.

United currently lie fifth in the First Division table and youngsters such as Michael Tonge, Michael Brown and Phil Jagielka are all currently being monitored by Premiership clubs.

Liverpool fell a goal behind to a Darius Vassell penalty before the Reds stormed back with goals from Danny Murphy, Milan Baros and Gerrard. An injury-time winner by Murphy sealed victory.

Manchester United reached the semi-finals by beating Chelsea 1-0 on Tuesday night while Blackburn saw saw off Wigan 2-0 at the JJB Stadium.

THE SEMIFINAL DRAW

Manchester United v Blackburn

Sheffield United v Liverpool

** Ties to be played over two legs in the weeks beginning January 6 and January 20. Manchester United and Sheffield United play at home in the first leg.*

Italian Cup

Top guns in qtrs

Football

REUTERS, *Rome*

AC Milan reached the Italian Cup quarter finals by thrashing Ancona 5-1 thanks to goals from Rui Costa, Jon Dahl Tomasson (2), Marco Borriello and Leonardo in the second leg of their third-round tie.

Milan seemed headed for a tough night when Ancona striker Maurizio Ganz put his side ahead on aggregate with a left-footed shot on seven minutes after the first leg ended in a 1-1 draw.

But the Serie A leaders reacted almost immediately as playmaker Rui Costa equalised in the 10th minute and three minutes later they took the lead when Leonardo's pass across the area was swept in by Danish striker Jon Dahl Tomasson.

Six minutes before the break Tomasson swerved round goalkeeper Piergraziano Gori to steer in his second and Milan's third of the night.

Second-half goals by 20-year-old striker Marco Borriello and Leonardo completed the rout and sent Milan through to the quarter-finals where they will meet Chievo Verona.

Earlier on Wednesday, Juventus, 2-0 ahead from the first leg, went through to the last eight despite losing 1-0 to Reggina in the second leg of their third-round tie in Turin.

Roberto Maffucci put visitors Reggina ahead in the 22nd minute after a long ball by midfielder Ricardo Veron left him with only reserve goalkeeper Antonio Chimenti to beat.

But Reggina defender Riccardo Alderuccio was sent off in the 85th minute after a second yellow card and Juventus went through 2-1 on aggregate. They now play the winners of the tie between Sampdoria and Perugia, which is due to be played on Thursday.

Chievo's goalless second-leg draw with Piacenza was enough to put them through to the last eight on away goals after the first leg finished 1-1 a fortnight ago.

Vicenza also progressed to the quarter-finals after a dramatic 2-0 third-round second-leg win at Bologna.

Vicenza had midfielder Michele Marcolini sent off in the 62nd minute, but went through after goals from Alessandro Sgrigna and Stefan Schwoch sealed a 3-1 aggregate win.

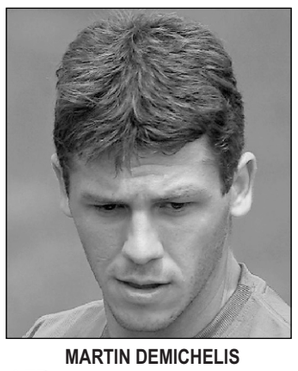
Midfielder Sgrigna broke the deadlock two minutes from time with a deflected effort that beat goalkeeper Ferdinando Coppola.

Two minutes later striker Schwoch added a second from the penalty spot after being brought down by defender Cristian Zaccardo.

Vicenza, who beat last season's Italian Cup winners Parma in the previous round, face AS Roma in the last eight.

On Thursday, Perugia face Sampdoria (1400), Empoli play Lazio (1630) and Inter Milan take on Bari (2000) in the remaining third-round second-leg ties.

Bayern get 'Dream defender'



MARTIN DEMICHELIS

AFP, *Munich*

Bayern Munich president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said the club had found their "dream defender" after agreeing terms with Argentinian Martin Demichelis on Wednesday.

Demichelis agreed to join Bayern from River Plate in a five-million-dollar deal after several weeks of negotiations.

The 21-year-old is expected to sign his contract in January.

"In him, we have found our dream defender," said Rummenigge.

Bayern also announced that Paraguayan striker Roque Santa Cruz and English midfielder Owen Hargreaves, also both 21, had extended their contracts with the club by a further two years and are now tied to the four-time European champions until 2006.

Bellamy banned for three games

AFP, *Nyon*

Newcastle striker Craig Bellamy has been banned for three Champions League matches for violent conduct after being sent off against Inter Milan last month, UEFA said on Wednesday.

Wales international Bellamy, 23, responded to a shove from his marker Marco Materazzi with a petulant kick at the defender and received his marching orders in the fifth minute of the 4-1 home defeat on November 27.

Bellamy can appeal the ban, which would rule him out of three of Newcastle's final four second phase Champions League matches which resume against Germany's Bayer Leverkusen on Feburary 18, till midnight on Saturday.

Unfair allocation?

REUTERS, *London*

FIFA's shake-up of World Cup qualifying for the 2006 tournament shows soccer's governing body is more interested in a geographical spread of competitors than having the best 32 teams at the finals.

The new allocation of places raises the prospect of holders and five times champions Brazil missing out altogether while all but guaranteeing Australia, who did not win a match in their sole appearance at the finals, a place in Germany.

No country from outside Europe and South America has won the World Cup but it was those confederations which lost a half place -- a play-off against a country from another region -- in Tuesday's reorganisation.

"They couldn't beat us on the field so they've done (so) on the table," South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) spokesman Nestor Benitez said, summing up the surprise and upset in the region at FIFA's decision.

UEFA are reduced to a substantial 13 representatives plus 2006 hosts Germany, but South America, which has provided the winners of nine of the 17 World Cup tournaments, will have just four teams at the finals.

The beneficiaries of the re-allocation were CONCACAF, the North and Central American, and Caribbean Confederation, who now have three and a half spots, and Oceania - guaranteed a place in the finals for the first time.

With Asia (4-1/2 places) and Africa (5) keeping the places they had, the new allocation looks to be an improvement when viewed solely in geographical terms.

Looked at in terms of footballing pedigree, however, the changes can be seen in another light by comparing the prospective paths to the finals of Brazil and Australia.

It was the loss of the automatic berth for the previous Cup winners that allowed the shake-up. Brazil must now take their chances with nine other South American nations in the toughest qualifying competition for one of its four places at the finals.

Quality runs through the South American competition -- even the one-time whipping boys from baseball-mad Venezuela have improved -- and it was only a late run of form which allowed the Brazilians to qualify outright last year in fourth place.

That left twice world champions Uruguay, who finished fifth, to take on Australia over two legs for a place in the finals, which they successfully negotiated.

It was not Australia's first defeat at the final hurdle -- they had lost to Iran and Argentina to miss out on the 1994 and 1998 finals -- and their inability to get past the playoff prompted Oceania's intense lobbying for a guaranteed place.

By contrast to Brazil, Australia's route to their playoff defeat by Uruguay last year took in five matches against fellow members of the Oceania confederation.

They won all five, scored 72 goals, conceded one and registered 31-0 and 22-0 victories over American Samoa and Tonga respectively.

Australia -- where soccer comes in fifth behind cricket, Australian Rules and both codes of rugby as the sport of choice -- are ranked 50th in the FIFA rankings, well behind six of the South American nations.

To get to Germany, Australia may once again have to ease past the hapless American Samoans, who are the third worst team in the world, according to FIFA's rankings.

In one of the quirks of the FIFA ranking system, New Zealand are ranked above Australia in 49th place and represent the only threat to Australia's place at the finals and the $11 million cash windfall predicted by Oceania president Basil Scarsella.

"Yeah, the Aussies think they are already in Germany," said New Zealand Soccer chief executive Bill MacGowan in an interview on Wednesday. "In reality they would have to think that.

"But I think it's a big challenge for us to make sure it doesn't become a Soccer Australia charity."

Australian soccer has come on leaps and bounds since their 1974 appearance at the finals in West Germany, when they drew once and lost twice.

But should the unthinkable happen in 2006, would the green and gold of the Socceroos and the presence of Leeds United strikers Harry Kewell and Mark Viduka really be compensation enough for the absence of the yellow of Brazil and Ronaldo and Ronaldinho?

Barca tracking Romario?

Football

AFP, *Barcelona*

Crisis-hit Spanish giants Barcelona are bidding to rekindle their former love affair with veteran Brazilian striker Romario, according to a well-placed source here Wednesday.

The 36-year-old Romario once played alongside compatriot Ronaldo at the Nou Camp in Barcelona's halcyon days when Johan Cruyff was in charge, and was the Primera Liga's top scorer in 1994.

Now Romario, who has been without a club since playing his last game for Brazilian outfit Fluminense a few weeks ago, could join on a free transfer.

Barcelona coach Louis van Gaal had called for a new striker at the start of the season, and the club were in contact with Brazilian Mario Jardel and Chelsea's Dutchman Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink.

Club president Joan Gaspart has backed Van Gaal despite calls for his resignation following Barcelona's 3-0 home defeat to Sevilla on Sunday which left the Catalan club struggling in the Spanish top flight.

The Spanish press say Van Gaal will be fired if his side lose their next league match at Real Mallorca on Saturday.

Meanwhile former Barcelona idol Rivaldo says the troubled Catalan club should sack Van Gaal.

"The solution is to change the coach," the Brazilian told Spanish sports daily Marca on Thursday. "If that happens the players and fans will recover their enthusiasm again."

"I am not saying this just to be spiteful, it is simply the case that I do not like the way he works."

Rivaldo joined AC Milan after rescinding his contract with Barcelona in July, making it clear the return of van Gaal was the reason behind his decision to leave.

During van Gaal's first spell in charge at the Nou Camp, between 1997 and 2000, Rivaldo challenged his coach's authority by demanding to play in the centre of the pitch rather than out on the left wing.

Van Gaal won the battle of wills and Rivaldo was forced to apologise for his comments after sitting out two games, but relations between the two suffered irrevocable damage.

Following four defeats in five matches, Barcelona have dropped to 13th place in the table, a distant 16 points behind leaders Real Sociedad and only two above the relegation zone.