



Real Madrid's star attraction David Beckham (L) jogs with his bodyguard on the outskirts of Nice, on the French Riviera on July 9, where he is spending holidays at British singer Elton John's house.

Real hot!

AFP, Beijing

Chinese football fans will have to pay a hefty price for a glimpse of glamour boy David Beckham and his superstar colleagues at Real Madrid when they play in Beijing.

Ticket prices for the Spanish team's match against a Chinese XI at the 60,000-seat Worker's Stadium are expected to cost up to 2,000 yuan (250 dollars), more than a month's salary for the average Beijing resident, the Shanghai Evening Post reported.

Standard tickets are expected to fall into one of five price categories, ranging from 180 to 1,280 yuan.

The Spanish League champions, with the likes of Ronaldo, Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and Raul Gonzalez on the payroll, take to the field for the exhibition match on August 2.

They will also spend a week at the Chinese national team's high altitude training ground in southwestern Yunnan province from July 25 to 31.

Event organisers began taking ticket reservations Thursday, the report said.

Despite the high price organizers expect tickets to sell out fast.

Geremi Chelsea's

REUTERS, London

Chelsea have signed Cameroon international midfielder Geremi for 6.9 million pounds (\$11.30 million), the BBC reported on Friday.

The Real Madrid player, who spent last season on loan at Middlesbrough, is the second signing in two days for the premier league club following West Ham defender Glen Johnson's move there for an undisclosed fee.

Geremi was one of a long list of targets for Chelsea, which also included Inter Milan's Christian Vieri and Blackburn Rovers' Damien Duff, British newspapers said.

Chelsea, who were bought last week by Russian billionaire Ramon Abramovich, had offers for Paris St Germain's Brazilian striker Ronaldinho and Juventus midfielder Edgar Davids rejected on Thursday.



Liverpool's latest signing Australian star Harry Kewell during a photo shoot at Anfield on July 10.

Kewell bares his soul

Football

AFP, London

Australian international Harry Kewell was unveiled as a Liverpool player on Thursday and delivered a parting shot to former club Leeds as the summer's most acrimonious transfer saga came to an end.

The 24-year-old moved to Anfield in a five-million-pound (\$8.1 million dollars) deal just a day after Leeds chairman John McKenzie accused him of 'stabbing Leeds fans in the back' when he admitted to having started talks with the Merseysiders six months ago.

It was also revealed that the player and his advisors received a two-million-pound 'loyalty payment' from the cash-strapped Elland Road outfit.

However, Kewell was unrepentant over the affair.

"I'm sorry to say that Leeds never offered me a new contract and never put actually figures and numbers in front of me for me to sit

down and discuss," said Kewell.

"It's very disappointing, I was there nine years and you expect a friendship with the club. They didn't want to offer me a contract."

"What has been said has taken the gloss off an exciting day for me. "You don't move too often in your career and I just wanted everything to go smoothly."

"I want to feel happy but all the things that have been said in the papers have made me out to look like a bad person."

Kewell, who has signed a five-year deal, said that the thought of working with Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier was a big attraction in his transfer to the club where he will link up with other fellow new signings Steve Finnan, who has joined from Fulham, as well as French teenagers Florent Sinama Pongolle and Anthony Le Tallec.

"I was very impressed by the manager. He really knows his football," Kewell told the Liverpool Echo.

"I have worked under some great managers during my time in the game. But I am really looking

forward to working with him because he really knows his stuff."

"Some great teams came in for me but the main factor in my decision was the manager."

"I have never won anything in my career yet and my main aim is to win things here."

Houllier said he hoped Kewell, who will don the number seven shirt made famous by Kevin Keegan and Kenny Dalglish, would be the key to taking Liverpool into the Champions League next season.

"This is a fantastic signing for the club and its fans. After the intense media interest in the player I am delighted we have finally completed a deal which can only excite our supporters all over the world," said the Frenchman.

"We had spoken about bringing in players who would have the fans on the edge of their seats and I can't think of a better description for the qualities that Harry will bring to Anfield."

"It's a huge boost for us ahead of the new campaign and an indication of Harry's belief in what we want to achieve here."

Changes in UEFA Cup, WC qualifiers

Football

REUTERS, Nyon

The UEFA Cup, European soccer's second club competition, was given a long-awaited overhaul on Thursday when UEFA's Executive Committee announced the introduction of a mini-league group stage to add excitement and television sales opportunities.

After a two-day meeting that also considered and proposed a revised qualifying format for the 2006 World Cup finals and an improved qualifying system for the 2008 European Championship finals, UEFA president Lennart Johansson said he was satisfied with the proposals.

"We believe that this format for the UEFA Cup will add excitement and give the competition a boost. It follows an extensive consultation within European football and it reflects a consensus for change," he said.

In the revised format to be introduced from 2004-05, the competition will begin with 16 clubs eliminated from the qualifying tournament for the Champions League joining 64 UEFA Cup qualifiers to make 80 teams meeting in a first round of 40 two-legged, home-and-away, matches.

The 40 winners then go into the new group stage to run from late October, through November, with eight groups of five clubs from which the top three in each advance to be joined by a further eight clubs, also eliminated after the group phase of the Champions League, in the traditional knockout tournament.

In the new mini-league stage, however, UEFA has introduced a fresh and unexpected ingredient: teams will only play each other once, not twice, and so they will play twice at home and twice away, the groups and fixtures to be decided by the UEFA seedings system.

"This means clubs will have a block of guaranteed matches in the competition that they can sell as a package to television broadcasters," pointed out UEFA spokesman

Mike Lee. "It could be very attractive for some of these clubs."

The 32-team knockout stage, it is proposed, will run from February to May with games played on a home-and-away basis, other than the final to be played at a neutral venue.

UEFA Chief Executive Gerhard Aigner said that UEFA had decided against any thoughts of introducing central marketing, as organised by UEFA for the Champions League, other than for the final. He said this gave the clubs their opportunity to make the most of the new format.

Following FIFA's recent decision to retain a 32-team finals tournament for the World Cup, the UEFA Executive Committee said it proposed enlarging the qualifying groups for the 2006 tournament in Germany, in line with requests received from national associations.

The committee agreed a proposal for three groups of seven nations and five of six, from which the eight group winners will qualify automatically together with the two best runners-up. The remaining three places in UEFA's 13 qualifying slots for the finals will be decided by play-offs between the six other group runners-up.

Aigner said: "The associations told us they wanted more meaningful football games so we have enlarged the groups to do this. It still leaves some spare dates on the international calendar for friendly matches."

He said the major European nations, including Italy, France, Spain and England, would most likely be seeded and separated among the groups of six.

The same principle, of trying to provide more meaningful games for the national associations, was applied to the qualifying system for the 2008 European finals to be hosted jointly by Austria and Switzerland.

This resulted in a proposed format based on one group of eight teams and six groups of seven to produce 14 qualifiers, the seven group winners and the seven runners-up. The two host nations make the total 16 teams in the finals.

Philosophical Hierro

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Former captain Fernando Hierro is disappointed at the way his 14-year career at Real Madrid was brought to an end, but says he has no ill feelings against the club.

The 35-year-old centre back was discarded together with coach Vicente del Bosque just 24 hours after they led the club to victory in last season's league championship.

"I don't bear any grudges because my view is that Real Madrid is more important than all of us," Hierro told sports daily Marca on Friday.

"I do believe, though, that there could have been a better way of bringing an end to my career at the club."

Real made the surprise decision not to keep the experienced defender after he had refused to lead the team out on a second lap of honour at the Bernabeu following their decisive win against Athletic Bilbao in the final game of the season.

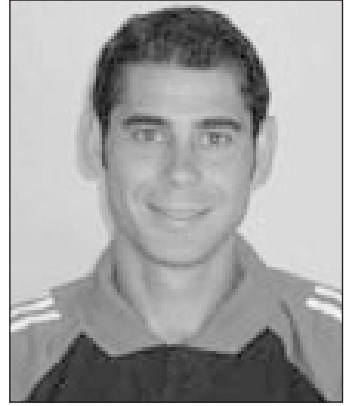
The players were reported to have been unhappy at the way the David Beckham signing had disrupted their preparations for the match and at the treatment of Del Bosque, who was not offered a new contract by the club.

But Hierro said he had no regrets about his role in the player protest. "All I did was tell (Real's sporting director Jorge) Valdano what I thought about the situation and all that had happened in the preceding days.

"I had an agreement with the club (to extend his contract), but they then decided it wasn't convenient for me to stay on and you have to respect that decision."

The former Spanish international said he was now considering his future, but after 14 years at Real it would be difficult for him to continue his career in Spain.

"Wearing the Real Madrid crest has been marvellous," he said. "Real has been my life, my home



FERNANDO HIERRO

and my family. I have given everything for the club."

"I don't know where my future now lies. My agent is listening to offers, but I haven't decided on anything yet. The only thing I am sure about is that it will be very difficult for me to continue playing in Spain."

Hierro played over 500 matches for Real and helped the team to three European Cups and six league titles after joining the club from Valladolid in 1989.

First choice United

Football

AFP/REUTERS, London

Brazilian star Ronaldinho wants to join Manchester United and is now waiting for his club Paris St Germain and the English Premiership champions to agree on a deal believed to be worth around 25 million euros.

The 23-year-old, who has also been linked with a switch to Barcelona, is determined to move to Old Trafford where he will be guaranteed Champions League football next season.

The Brazilian World Cup winner has told his brother and agent Roberto Assis that he has made up his mind about a move away from the cash-strapped French side.

"Ronaldinho wants to go to Manchester United, so at the moment it's just a question of waiting for the deal to be completed," Assis told the Press Association on Thursday.

But PSG German chairman Francis Graille said on Friday that the English champions have not yet made an official offer for.

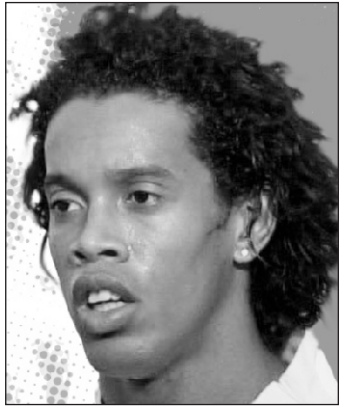
"Many rumours suggested we had done a deal with Manchester United but we have not yet received anything. We have only received written offers from Barcelona and Chelsea," Graille wrote in a statement.

French media say Manchester United have made a "first informal offer" of 20 million euros (\$22.64

million) to sign the Brazilian midfielder and would be ready to increase the fee to around 30 million euros.

Graille said on July 2 that he had turned down an offer for the striker after meeting Manchester United chief executive Peter Kenyon.

"If they want Ronaldinho, they must do better than this," he said at



RONALDINHO

the time. Ronaldinho has stated that he wants to leave PSG and failed to join the club's pre-season training camp, in Aix-les-Bains, on Thursday.

"Ronnie was set to re-join his team mates yesterday (Thursday) after a two-week holiday following Brazil's elimination from the Confederations Cup", Graille said.

"He was supposed to arrive yesterday evening but he is not yet here. He will therefore be punished. His attitude shows a lack of respect for PSG."

The PSG chairman said that he was still favouring an offer from Real Madrid who proposed to sign Ronaldinho at the end of next season.

"We would like to keep him at the moment and the proposal which suits us better is the one from Real Madrid. It would have the advantage of being able to keep Ronaldinho for another year before he joins the Spanish champions," Graille said in a statement.

Barcelona president Joan Laporta confirmed on Wednesday that the Catalan club had made an official bid for the World champions' playmaker.

"I don't want to go into details but we have made a firm and serious offer that reflects what a great club like Barcelona is capable of doing," he said.

Real Madrid chairman Florentino Perez has ruled out any move for Ronaldinho this year following the signing of England captain David Beckham and Argentine international centre back Gabriel Milito.

"The business of buying new players has now been closed and that's for sure," he said on Wednesday. "Milito's signing... means that Ronaldinho will not be coming to Real Madrid this year."

What's the catch?

Football

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti admitted to meeting Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich on Thursday, but dismissed talk that the Russian millionaire was in northern Italy to buy striker Christian Vieri.

"I met the Chelsea owner but it was just out of courtesy and to try and establish a rapport between my club and his," Moratti said.

"Sure, we talked about players. He asked about our best players, but Vieri is not for sale and the squad remains as it is."

Italy international Vieri, who turns 30 in two days time, was top scorer in Serie A last season with 24 goals.

The Chelsea squad arrived in Italy on Thursday to begin their pre-season training programme in Umbria.

Meanwhile, Italian champions Juventus said Thursday they had turned down a bid from Chelsea for Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids.

"It's true we have received an

offer from Chelsea but we refused it," Juventus' general director Luciano Moggi said.

"Davids is staying because he is important for the club's future."

According to media reports Chelsea are believed to have offered 11 million euros (12.46 million dollars) for the 30-year-old Dutch international who will be out of contract next summer.

Chelsea's new owner, Russian oil tycoon Abramovich, has prom-

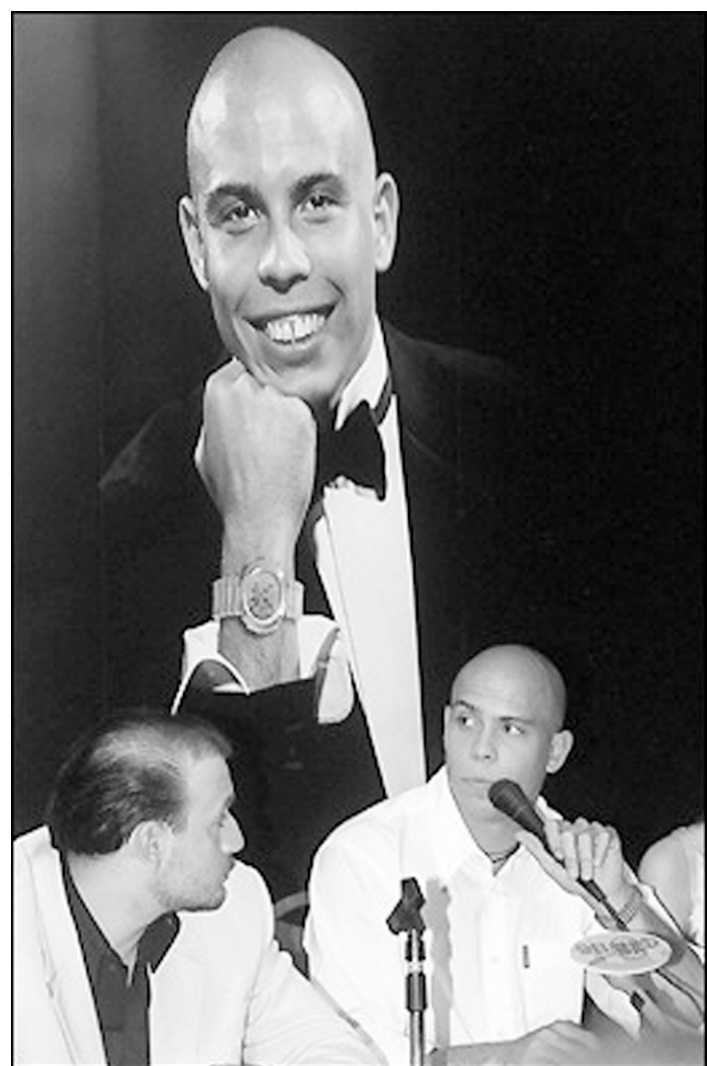
ised to strengthen the squad with central midfield his main priority.

He took control of the London club last week after agreeing to buy out Chelsea for 86 million euros (97.5 million dollars) and cover debts estimated at around 115 million euros (130 million dollars).

Abramovich has said he wants to build a Chelsea team that is capable of winning the Champions League in the next three years.



ROMAN ABRAMOVICH



A Reuters file photo showing Brazilian superstar Ronaldo at a press conference in Hong Kong during a promotion of the R9 watch by Montega.

Ronaldo's watch woes!

Football

AFP, Geneva

A Swiss watchmaker has gone into receivership blaming an injury suffered by Brazilian star Ronaldo for a drop in sales of a watch the player had promoted.

The Montega company has until August 25 to find a way out of insolvency and is currently locked in a legal dispute with the Brazil and Real Madrid striker, Geneva lawyer Benedict Fontanet said.

Montega said it signed a licensing deal with the player's marketing company, Emporio Ronaldo, in September 1998, allowing it to use the "R9" logo representing the 'R' for Ronaldo and the footballer's shirt number.

Under a clause in the contract, Ronaldo was meant to stay in good

health to ensure the promotion of the watches, the lawyer said.

But the Brazilian, who was then with Inter Milan in Italy, suffered a highly-publicised knee injury in 1999 which stopped him playing for several months.

The dispute between the two sides is currently being handled by an arbitration tribunal.

Lawyers for Montega claim Ronaldo knew of his knee trouble when he signed the watch deal, and are demanding the return of 1.6 million Swiss francs (1.1 million euros) advance fee paid to the Brazilian star as well as about 10 million Swiss francs in damages.

Ronaldo's lawyers are claiming six million Swiss francs in unpaid fees as well as the seizure of the remaining watches.

He was due to receive a total payment of 5.2 million dollars and royalties from sales, the Swiss news agency ATS reported.

Lopez back with old club

AFP, Valencia

Argentine international centre forward Claudio Lopez is leaving Lazio to return to his former club Valencia next season, the Spanish club announced on Thursday.

Valencia will knock the transfer fee of 8.5 million euros (9.6 million dollars) off the 24 million euros that financially troubled Lazio still owes the club for the transfer of Gaizka Mendietain 2001.

The Rome-based club has been unable to pay its debts.

Lopez, 29, moved to Lazio from Valencia in 2000 for a fee of 23 million euros.

Although the Argentinian was a firm favourite at Valencia during the four years he spent there, the club's coach Rafael Benitez has said he would regard the signing of Cameroonian international forward Samuel Eto'o as more important.

Eto'o, 23, has agreed to join Valencia from Real Mallorca but the deal has yet to be finalised.

Birmingham lesson for Cisse

AFP, Birmingham

Senegal international Aliou Cisse has paid the price for snubbing pre-season training by being fined and placed on the transfer list by Birmingham City.

He had been guilty of "a serious breach of club discipline," the club said.

The 27-year-old midfielder was expected to report back for pre-season training on July 2, but failed to show, according to the club's official website, www.bcf.com.

A statement read: "Cisse was requested to return earlier than the majority of the squad after missing much of the second half of last season through injury."

"It was hoped that the early return of players that had struggled with injury last term would aid their bid for full fitness."

"Cisse did not receive the messages asking him to report back early as he had lost both his mobile phones."

"This was accepted by the club, but - the day when the main bulk of the squad were due to return to West Hills for the start of pre-season training - Cisse arrived one-and-a-half hours late."

The Senegal captain was signed last summer from Montpellier after excelling for his country in the World Cup.

He impressed during the early months of the club's inaugural campaign in the Premiership - but it appears he may have played his last game for Blues.