



IT'S SO HOT! Chelsea players (R-L) Jo Keenan, Jasper Gronkjaer, Mikael Forssell and Filipe Oliveira cool themselves off with a water hose during training in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

# Asia too hot to handle!

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Training in Southeast Asia's heat and humidity is taking a heavy toll on the three English Premier League teams in Kuala Lumpur for a pre-season tournament, players and coaches said here Wednesday.

Birmingham City manager Steve Bruce told reporters his squad of 22 players had lost a combined 56 Kilograms (123 pounds) in weight since arriving here on Monday, with one player dropping three and a half kilograms.

"It shows how difficult it is for us over here," Bruce told reporters a day ahead of his team's clash against Newcastle United in the first match of the Premier League Asia Cup.

Birmingham captain Jeff Kenna also highlighted the tough conditions after the team trained in 30-degree-Celcius (86-degree-Fahrenheit) temperatures and humidity of more than 70 percent on Wednesday.

"The trouble we have really is the humidity, you just can't get your breath... it's very difficult to



Chelsea new signing Damien Duff at the team's hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

# It wasn't easy

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea's record signing Damien Duff admitted on Tuesday leaving Blackburn Rovers was the hardest decision of his life.

The Republic of Ireland winger headed to Stamford Bridge for 17 million pounds (27.2 million dollars), but revealed it was a wrench to leave the only club he has ever played for.

"It was a hard decision because I love it up in Blackburn," Duff told SkySports News.

"I was very happy there. It is a wonderful club but I have been down here about three times this week and it feels nice down here and my gut feeling was to sign. I just can't wait to start playing football."

He continued: "It has been the hardest decision of my life, that is why it has taken all week. People think I was stalling over this and that but I am gutted to leave Blackburn - but it is a new beginning for me and I just couldn't turn down this challenge.

"At the end of the day, it all came down to whether I wanted to go Chelsea or stay at Blackburn. Chelsea are one of the biggest clubs in England and hopefully I can make them one of the biggest ones in the world."

The Irish international believes the future looks bright for Chelsea and he fully expects to win trophies with his new club.

"They have a lot of world-class players and they are exciting times, especially with the new man coming in and all the money he's throwing at it," he added.

# US' ultimate test



REUTERS, Miami

Defending CONCACAF Gold Cup champions the United States have enjoyed a relatively easy run to the semi-finals of the biannual regional championship but now face a stiffer test in the shape of Brazil.

Comfortable 2-0 wins over El Salvador and Martinique set up a 5-0 quarter-final victory over amateurs Cuba, thanks to a sterling four-goal performance by striker Landon Donovan.

In Wednesday's semi the U.S. face Brazil's under-23 team but coach Bruce Arena is still expecting a tough challenge.

"Brazil has brought the best of its young players and Brazil's players are the best in the world," said Arena.

"You can't judge a player by his age, the real issue is the quality."

Brazil have been one of the more exciting teams in a largely lacklustre tournament.

After a defeat to Mexico in their

opener, Brazil defeated Honduras and then beat fellow-invitees Colombia 2-0 in the quarter-finals with a pair of goals from Sao Paulo striker Kaka.

This is the second time in six weeks that the two nations will play following a 1-0 win for Brazil's senior team in the opening round of the Confederations Cup last month in France.

In addition to Kaka, the focal point of the side is the Santos duo of midfielder Diego and forward Robinho.

The team mix speed and agility with skilled ball movement, prime traits of some Brazilian football.

"This (Brazilian) team is good," said U.S. defender Carlos Bocanegra.

"It looks like their work rate is higher than their senior team, especially since they (players) are all still trying to prove themselves.

## PROBABLE TEAMS

**United States:** 18-Kasey Keller, 3-Greg Vanney, 4-Carlos Bocanegra, 6-Cory Gibbs, 2-Frankie Hejduk, 7-Eddie Lewis, 10-Claudio Reyna, 25-Pablo Mastroeni, 17-DaMarcus Beasley, 20-Brian McBride, 21-Landon Donovan.

**Brazil:** 1-Gomes, 2-Maicon, 3-Luisao, 4-Alex, 5-Adriano, 6-Paulo Almeida, 7-Julio Baptista, 10-Diego, 15-Nilmar, 8-Kaka, 11-Robinho.

**Referee:** Carlos Batres (Guatemala).



COULDN'T CARE LESS? Fans of Manchester United express their aparent disinterest in the loss of David Beckham to Real Madrid before the Red Devils' friendly match against Glasgow Celtic on July 22 July.

# United thump Celtic

Football

AFP, Seattle

English Premiership giants Manchester United kicked off their four-game US tour with a 4-0 triumph over Scottish rivals Celtic Tuesday before a sell-out crowd of 66,722 at Seahawks Stadium.

Ruud van Nistelrooy was the man of the match, scoring the opening goal in the seventh minute and creating the second as United scored three goals in the first half.

Taking a pass from Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, van Nistelrooy spun past Neil Lennon and Stanislav Varga in the box to blast a shot past goalkeeper Magnus Hedman.

"This was a great way to start our tour," van Nistelrooy said. "It was amazing to play in such an atmosphere - I had been told that soccer didn't live in America, but obviously it does."

Twenty minutes later, Ryan Giggs partnered with van Nistelrooy. The former PSV Eindhoven star had a breakthrough attempt saved by Hedman, but then got his own rebound and coolly flipped it back to Giggs. The Welshman buried it and the match cleanly at the near post.

Solskjaer added a third tally in

the 39th minute when Peter Neville fed him the ball down the right flank, allowing him a clean shot to the near post.

New transfer David Bellion, fresh from Sunderland, scored in his debut match in the 72nd minute with a wonderful left-footed effort that caught Hedman off guard.

Celtic had their chances, including a dreadful missed penalty attempt after Roy Keane felled Stilian Petrov in the 18th minute. Alan Thompson stepped up to the spot but pulled the ball wide left and over the crossbar.

"They displayed very clinical finishing tonight," Celtic manager Martin O'Neill said. "But I think we gifted them with some of the goals, and you can't do that."

United's new American import, keeper Tim Howard must wait for his debut with the club. Roy Carroll spent the entire night Tuesday between the posts.

Manchester United next faces Club America of Mexico in Los Angeles on Sunday before heading East to take on Italy's Juventus at Giants Stadium on July 31 and Barcelona on August 3 in Philadelphia.

The tour is an event that could have huge implications for world-wide soccer. Should it be the suc-

"They come out with something different every game. They're really dynamic so you really don't know what to expect."

Historically the U.S. have not fared well against Brazil. In 11 meetings dating to 1930, the Americans have lost 10 times.

The lone victory game in the semi-finals of the 1998 Gold Cup where Kasey Keller turned in the finest display of a U.S. goalkeeper in the modern era.

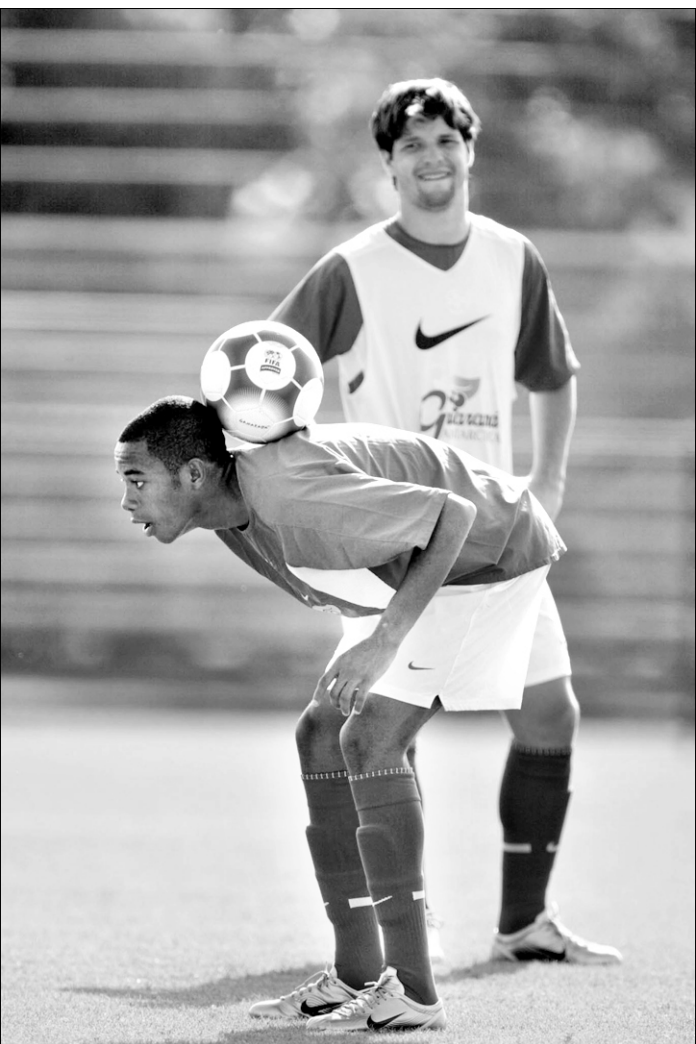
"The U.S. team is very disciplined," said Brazil's under-23 coach Ricardo Gomes. "They have some very experienced players and impressed at the World Cup last year.

"I think they have a pretty good attacking system so we expect a very tough game against them."

While fielding a somewhat inexperienced defence, the U.S. will start a nearly full strength attack with Brian McBride partnering Donovan while Sunderland's Claudio Reyna will marshal the midfield.

Preston North End's Eddie Lewis, who set up four goals against Cuba, could play a key role on the left flank while DaMarcus Beasley, sidelined since July 9 with a sprained ankle, could return on the right side.

Mexico take on Costa Rica in the other semi-final to be played on Thursday in Mexico City's cavernous Azteca Stadium, the site of the final on Sunday. The third-place fixture will be held on Saturday in Miami.



THE JUGGLERS! Brazil's sensational teenager Robinho balances the ball on his back during practice while teammate and best friend Diego watches at Miami on July 22.

# Mania part two?

Football

AFP, Madrid

Madrid gave vent to a fresh bout of Beckham-mania after England star David Beckham arrived in the Spanish capital on Tuesday night ready to start pre-season training with Real Madrid.

Spanish tabloids snapped Beckham, who joined Real on July 2 for 35 million euros from Manchester United, driving through the outskirts of the city after he and wife Victoria landed at the city's Torrejon airport on a private jet from his French holiday base at Cannes, flying in from Nice.

"Beckham has arrived," trumpeted Marca magazine, which pictured Beckham, clad in a baseball cap and white t-shirt, at the wheel of a silver Range Rover with his wife appearing to crouch in the back while a friend of the pair rode in the passenger seat.

The celebrity couple headed straight for the city's plush Santo Mauro hotel - where French star Zinedine Zidane also spent his first days in Madrid - for a brief stay as Real are scheduled to jet off Wednesday on an 18-day tour of Asia.

Beckham, who has spent the summer getting fit in the South of France, was set to spy out the residential zone of La Moraleja in the north of Madrid for a place to live.

The area, which has its own self-contained community of well-heeled madrilenos, is just minutes from Real's training complex and also within easy airport access.

England skipper Beckham has already run the rule over several

properties in the area, having spent two days in Madrid three weeks ago when he was presented to the fans following his club medical.

Later Wednesday he was due to work on an television advertisement with one of his sponsors.

Beckham, 28, joins the Spanish champions, and nine-times European champions, on a

four-year contract worth an estimated six million euros a year before bonuses.

The remainder of the Real squad were due to report later Wednesday before heading out to Kunming in China for a week of training ahead of a lucrative round of pre-season friendlies, which begin with an August 2 match in Beijing against local outfit Dragon Team.

Real have also pencilled in an August 5 match against FC Tokyo in the Japanese capital before the squad fly to Hong Kong for an August 8 match against China.

However, a match in Kuala Lumpur has been cancelled after the Malaysians complained Real were asking for too much.

Beckham is set to make his competitive debut for Real in Mallorca, where the league champions take on Cup winners Real Mallorca in the Spanish Super Cup.

Initially scheduled for August 17, the first leg will be in Mallorca on August 24 with the second leg in Madrid three days later.

Real are looking to arrange a warm-up against Espanyol on August 17 - which if it goes ahead would be Beckham's debut on Spanish soil. The match and venue are yet to be confirmed.



Barcelona manager Frank Rijkaard tells superstar Ronaldinho something during the Brazilian's first training session at Barcelona on July 22.

# Greedy Real!

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Asia's football chief described Real Madrid on Wednesday as "blood-suckers" and "mercenaries", accusing them of demanding three times more than other clubs in appearance fees for their upcoming Asian tour.

Asian Football Confederation secretary general Peter Velappan told AFP he was disgusted with the Spanish giants and had ordered his 45 national associations to never offer such big sums of money to attract touring teams.

"We have been bringing teams from all over the world to Asia for the past 20 to 25 years, never have I come across a team claiming such exorbitant fees," Velappan said, two days before Real were due to begin their tour in China.

"We welcome teams to come here and show off their footballers but not for the price they are asking. This is totally unacceptable. It's mercenary."

Velappan said Real had demanded close to three million dollars in appearance fees to play in various Asian cities, plus five-star accommodation for 40 people and other costs.

"This is unheard of in the history of visiting teams," he said, adding their demands were triple those of other big-name clubs that had toured Asia recently.

"While we respect the players, they should never suck the blood out of the people who support them."

Velappan said there appeared to be a wrong perception that Asia's fanatical football fans were wealthy.

"The average football fan is not a rich fella. He coughs out game after game his savings for him and his family," he said.

"The teams must appreciate that. They can't possibly exploit the generosity of the fans or else they will lose them."

Velappan was commenting a day after Malaysian officials confirmed a match between Real and the national team scheduled for August 10 had been cancelled because of the cost factor.

Malaysian media reports said Real Madrid had demanded 11 million ringgit (2.9 million dollars) to play in Kuala Lumpur, while the total cost of staging the match would have reached 18 million ringgit.

Singapore had also reportedly rejected the Spanish champion's overtures to host a match in the city-state because of the appearance fee demands, and Hong Kong balked at the price before eventually agreeing to stage a game.

Chinese state-run media also revealed on Wednesday that football club Shanghai Shenhua had turned down a Real Madrid offer to set up a training camp in the booming city because they wanted too much money.

Real had solicited the Shanghai-based A-league club about using their training grounds but wanted seven million yuan (853,000 dollars) for the honour, the New Times reported.

"According to current situations and the levels of domestic consumption and football markets, we didn't expect many fans would go to the field to watch just 10 minutes of a Real Madrid practice session," the newspaper said, quoting unnamed Shenhua sources.

The superstar-heavy Real eventually agreed to a deal with Kunming-based A-league club Yunnan Hongta in southern China to train there from July 25 to 31, before heading to Beijing for a match against a Chinese invitational team on August 2.

Real Madrid have promised to showcase all their superstars, including David Beckham, Ronaldo and Raul on the tour, which will now take in only China, Japan and Hong Kong, as they seek to stamp their footprint in Asia.

# First day, first show

INTERNET, Barcelona

Ronaldinho was the star of the show yesterday morning at FC Barcelona's La Masia training ground.

150 fans turned up to see the Brazilian weave his magic and he didn't disappoint.

The feeling of euphoria that began with the star's presentation on Monday continued unabashed today with his first training session under Frank Rijkaard's orders.

The manager decided to open the doors to the public and 150 fans were present to witness their new idol at work.

Despite training starting at 9 o'clock in the morning, the presence of so many fans clearly shows just how important the Brazilian's arrival has become.

The training session started with a physical workout before moving on to five-a-side games where the player exhilarated fans with two goals, one with each foot. One of the goals was a peach with the Brazilian losing his marker in style before slotting home emphatically. The star also created another with a gem of a pass for Dani Garcia to finish.

The session was the only one that Ronaldinho will take part in before the team begins their tour of the United States. The player returns to Paris and then goes on to Brazil to clear up some personal issues, before joining his teammates in Boston on the 27th July.