

Veron vows vengeance

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea's latest recruit Juan Sebastian Veron has vowed to prove Manchester United were wrong to offload him by helping his new club dethrone the English champions off their perch.

The Argentina midfielder only displayed flashes of his undoubted ability in his two seasons at United, leaving United boss Alex Ferguson to conclude that he should accept Chelsea's 15-million-pound offer for him.

Veron said United's decision to sell reflected a breakdown in his relationship with Ferguson and predicted a better understanding

with Chelsea's Italian manager Claudio Ranieri.

"Ferguson trusted me when I first arrived but later on it seemed we didn't understand each other as well," Veron told reporters.

"There were times when I felt he preferred some of my team-mates. I think I'll understand Claudio Ranieri better because of the language.

"I can do a job in English football - and in London that will be reaffirmed.

"I've nothing to prove against United but when I play against them I will play to win, like I always do."

Both Veron and Chelsea's other new signing Joe Cole, a 6.6-million-pound capture from West Ham, will be available for the Champions League qualifier against Slovakia's Zilina next week.

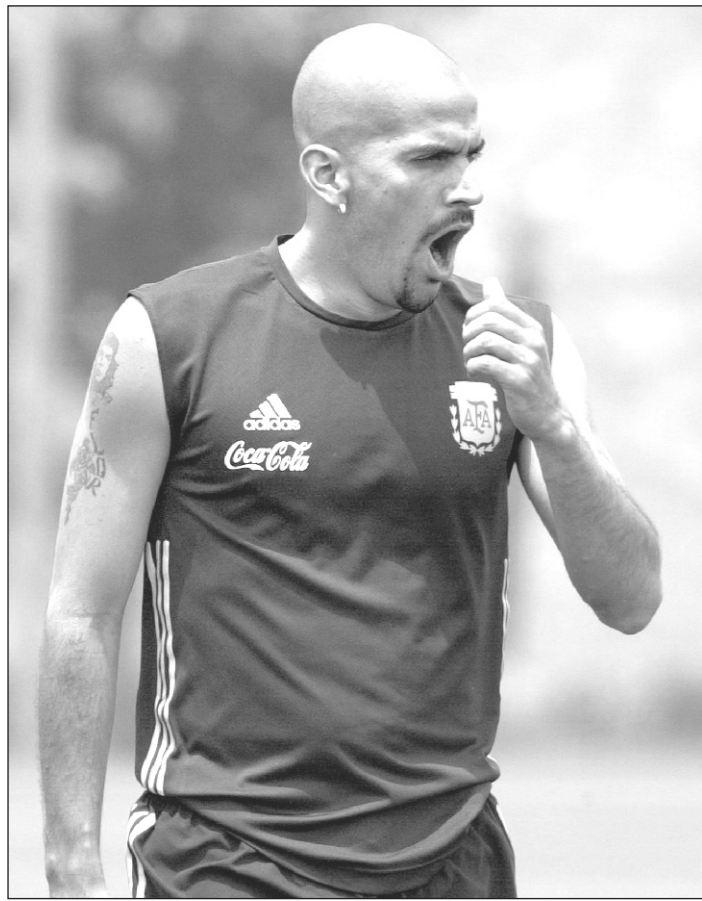
Speculation is also mounting that Chelsea are close to capturing Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri in a deal that will take their summer spending spree to 80 million pounds.

Chelsea's squad had been transformed thanks to the fortunes of the club's new owner, Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich.

And England midfielder Frank Lampard admitted that the huge cash injection had generated enormous pressure for the players to deliver on the pitch.

"People outside of Chelsea will be wanting us to fail because of the money we have spent. That is the harsh reality of football. The pressure is on but we will put pressure on ourselves anyway.

"With the players we have bought we should be up there fighting to win the league."



JUAN SEBASTIAN VERON

Real mixed bag

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

Real Madrid supremo Florentino Perez apologised here Thursday after the Spanish giants committed yet another public-relations blunder on the Hong Kong leg of their gaffe-prone Asia tour.

and disillusioned."

Real looked to be in danger of compounding their gaffe on Thursday, when they kept a crowd of around 20,000 fans waiting in boiling sunshine before finally starting training more than one hour later than scheduled.

Local TV reports said the superstars only made it back to their hotel at 3am after their night on the town.

wildly at every touch.

Beckham, Ronaldo, skipper Raul and French star Zinedine Zidane later met 30 children who were orphaned by the outbreak of the killer SARS virus earlier this year.

Real, who have been reportedly paid around 20 million Hong Kong dollars (2.5 million US) to appear here, play a Hong Kong select side bolstered by a handful of Chinese



PHOTO: AFP

THERE'S ALWAYS TIME FOR CHILDREN: Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo (R) signs the jersey of a young girl whose family was affected by the recent SARS virus, during a training session at the Hong Kong Stadium yesterday as teammate and captain Raul Gonzalez (L) looks on.

David Beckham and his superstar team-mates had left around 1,000 fans disappointed after skipping a public training session Wednesday following their arrival in the former British colony.

The club said its players had been too tired to train - but just hours later pictures of Beckham, Ronaldo and team-mates enjoying a late night at the Dragon-i nightclub were plastered all over Hong Kong's papers, with several contrasting Real's conduct with that of Chinese NBA star Yao Ming.

Yao, who played in an exhibition match at the Hong Kong Coliseum on Wednesday, received widespread praise for his conduct during a flying visit to the territory.

"Yao wins hearts as Beckham parties," a front-page headline in the English-language South China Morning Post daily read.

"NBA star Yao Ming dunked ... while Real Madrid flunked," the paper commented, saying Real's no-show at Wednesday's training session had left fans "hot, bothered

Perez apologised for what he described as a "mis-communication", the latest of several to have put noses out of joint during Real's money-spinning Asian jaunt.

"I would like to apologise for any

The Real Madrid Hong Kong match will be televised live on TEN Sports channel from 5:30 BST

offence caused to the people of Hong Kong and our fans," Perez said at a press conference.

"We believed that we had only planned an indoor training session at the hotel, and we were not ready for training at the stadium," said the Real president. "Once again we apologise."

But all appeared to be forgiven when the squad trained in front of around 28,000 spectators at the Hong Kong Stadium.

Fans who had been let in free to attend cheered and applauded

internationally on Friday night.

The match at the 40,000-capacity Hong Kong Stadium sold out within hours of tickets going on sale last week, with some fans camping out days in advance to pay for tickets priced between 500 and 1,500 Hong Kong dollars.

But their four match tour - which ends in Bangkok against Thailand on Sunday - has been bedevilled by PR problems from the outset.

During a week-long training camp in Kunming, southwest China, players astounded officials by skipping a banquet given in their honour, before cancelling two training sessions.

Marketing officials have said the club will pocket eight million euros (9.1 million dollars) from the jaunt.

Last week, Asian Football Confederation chief Peter Velappan described Real Madrid as "blood-suckers" and "mercenaries," accusing them of demanding three times more than other clubs in appearance fees.

Blues catching Vieri?

THE SUN, London

Chelsea still believe they can land Christian Vieri for 22 million pounds.

The Inter Milan hitman wants to be the latest big signing at Stamford Bridge and is ready to accept a mind-boggling deal worth 5.8 million pounds a year.

Chelsea's new owner Roman Abramovich also wants to bring his spending to 80.6 million pounds, despite having been at the club for little more than a month.

And the Blues will on Thursday aim to persuade the Serie A club to part with a player who has scored 17 goals in 31 matches for Italy.

Late Wednesday night, Inter were still determined to keep hold of the striker as they believe he could not be replaced, even with a similar fee.

The last-ditch bid for Vieri came just 24 hours after both Joe Cole and Juan Veron agreed to move to Claudio Ranieri's new-look team.

Vieri originally demanded 150,000 pounds a week but will leave Milan for 112,000 pounds a week 5.8 million pounds a year.

He had intended to stay at the San Siro but the fact Inter have indicated they are prepared to cash in has persuaded him to think again.

Negotiations began a week ago after they left him out of their pre-season tournament in Amsterdam.

Representatives of new Chelsea owner Abramovich were in Italy attempting to seal the signature of the Golden Boot winner but that bid failed.

Boss Hector Cuper insisted he wanted Vieri to stay, although his star has played in only two pre-season games.

Vieri became the most expensive footballer in the world when he signed for a record-breaking 32 million pounds from Lazio four years ago.

Abramovich's next move could be for another striker, with Real Mallorca's 21 million pounds rated Cameroon ace Samuel Eto'o firmly in his sights.

'Beckham the booter was signed'

AFP, Hong Kong

Buying David Beckham was a sporting decision rather than a commercial one, Real Madrid insisted Thursday on the latest lucrative leg of their Asian tour.

Real president Florentino Perez said the purchase of England's captain - arguably the most famous sportsman in the world - had been based principally on footballing reasons.

"Let me say that the decision to buy Beckham was purely a sporting one," said Perez, when asked whether Real's tour of the Far East had gone towards recouping Beckham's 35 million-euro (39.8 million dollars) price tag.

"This tour of Asia is not only about Beckham. The team is very popular here and we have many good players that our fans would like to see."

Football analysts have said Real's decision to buy Beckham was taken with one eye on breaking into the Asian market, a traditional stronghold of clubs from the English Premiership.

Former Manchester United star Beckham enjoys huge popularity in Asia and has been mobbed on every stop of the tour, which also includes China, Japan and Thailand.

But Perez said the tour - which analysts estimate will earn the Spaniards over eight million euros in appearance fees alone - was not about money.

"Real Madrid is not a company," he said. "We don't have to earn money for shareholders or any kind of company."

Conceicao back with Lazio

AFP, Rome

Portuguese international Sergio Conceicao is to leave Inter Milan for a second spell with Italian rivals Lazio, the Rome side announced on Wednesday.

Conceicao, played for Lazio in 2000 before moving to Parma, has signed a one-year deal with the option of an extra season.

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES

REUTERS, Paris

French Ligue 1 soccer fixtures for August 8 and 9 (1800 GMT kickoffs unless stated):

Friday: Olympique Marseille v AJ Auxerre (1845)

Saturday: Lille v Paris St Germain (1515), Olympique Lyon v Monaco, Bastia v Metz, Girondins Bordeaux v Montpellier, Le Mans v AC Ajaccio, Nantes v Lens, Nice v Sochaux, Stade Rennes v Toulouse Racing, Strasbourg v En Avant Guingamp.



PHOTO: AP

Dutch international striker Roy Makaay (R) shares a light-hearted moment with Bayern Munich star Michael Ballack during his first training session in Munich on August 7.

Makaay unveiled, but...

Football

AFP, Munich

The protracted transfer of striker Roy Makaay to Bayern Munich continued to drag on Thursday despite the Dutch international taking part in a training session with his new team-mates.

Makaay, 28, was believed to have sealed a 17.7 million euros transfer to Bayern from Deportivo La Coruna and a statement on the German champions' website seemed to suggest the deal was done.

"The transfer is finally signed and sealed," confirmed a statement on the Bayern official website www.fcbayern.t-online.de

However a dispute about who is responsible for paying Makaay's former club Vitesse Arnhem their part of the pie in the deal is ongoing.

As a result, Bayern have had to take a step back.

"Makaay has reached an agreement with Bayern and now only the formalities are missing," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"Strictly speaking he is not our player."

"But we are convinced that he will be on the transfer list on Monday and on Tuesday will make his debut for us against Nuremberg."

La Coruna president Augusto Lendoiro confirmed Wednesday evening that Bayern had been faxed a first copy of the contract but the financial side of the deal has caused friction between the two clubs.

"We are waiting to receive a signed copy of the contract from Munich," declared Lendoiro.

"But what use is it to us if Bayern pay a few more million euros if we have to pay the percentage to the player, a fee for his agent and other costs."

It is still unclear who will pay the estimated 885,000 euros to Makaay's former club Vitesse Arnhem for aiding his development.

FIFA regulation stipulates that the feeder club receives a windfall amounting to five percent of the transfer fee, in this case 885,000 euros, a sum that La Coruna president Lendoiro seems unwilling to pay.

"We think that our agreements with La Coruna are okay," maintained general manager Uli Hoessner.

Makaay has signed a four-year contract at Bayern binding him to the club until June 30, 2007.

His arrival will put pressure on strike duo Giovanni Elber, top-scorer in the Bundesliga last season, and Peruvian marksman Claudio Pizarro.

The missing spark

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United's decision to sell both David Beckham and Juan Sebastian Veron this summer has left the club facing a creativity gap on the field and a credibility gap off it.

With Veron expected to finalise the terms of his 15-million-pound (24million dollars) move to Chelsea on Thursday, both the judgement of United manager Alex Ferguson and the motives of the club's directors have come under intense scrutiny.

The two deals will swell the coffers of England's richest club by up to 40 million pounds over the next few seasons.

But money in the bank will be little consolation to United fans concerned about the weakening of a squad that, as last season's Champions League quarter-final showed, was already struggling to keep up with Beckham's new employers, Real Madrid.

When the England captain was allowed to leave in June, the reaction from United fans was muted largely because most were confident that Ronaldinho would be arriving to replace him.

But after weeks of tortuous negotiations, that deal fell apart and the Brazilian playmaker ended up moving to Barcelona.

In his place, United have signed another member of Brazil's 2002 World Cup winning team, Kleberston, as well as bringing in Eric Djemba-Djemba from Nantes for 3.5 million pounds and David Bellion from Sunderland.

None of them have yet done anything to suggest they can make up for the loss of the two players recognised as United's best passers of the ball.

Both Kleberston and Cameroon international Djemba-Djemba have made their names as defensive midfielders, while Bellion is more of a traditional winger.

"It's always difficult letting good

players go but we are very, very well off in the midfield and the overall package made it too interesting for us not to take it," Ferguson said as he defended the sale of Veron.

"He was on a massive salary and it's worth a lot of money to us. We had a collection of central midfield players who made my life difficult enough as it is so when an offer came in for Seba we decided to take it."

Ferguson could offset fans' frustrations by using Ole Gunnar Solskjaer as a cutting edge in midfield after the Norwegian inter-

"I believe the loss of David and Juan Sebastian is a bit too much for them to handle," Wilkins said.

"They're big players they have lost but I'm sure Alex has something up his sleeve before the season starts."

Tommy Docherty, one of Ferguson's predecessors as manager, accused the United board of treating the club like "a giant fruit machine".

"They just pull the lever if they want some more money."

While Chelsea, bankrolled by Russian billionaire Roman



ERIC DJEMBA-DJEMBA

national impressed in that position last season.

"Ole is one of the most knowledgeable players in the squad now, he's a real student of the game and an excellent pro," said Ferguson.

"I started to play him wide on the left, thinking that would be his natural position and allow him to cut in on his right foot. But when he played on the right he was magnificent for us."

The United boss also insisted that his priority was to reinforce the defence - where he is expected to sign Tunisian fullback Hatem Traabelsi from Ajax and has been linked with a move for Barcelona's Carlos Puyol - as well as another striker.

But former United midfielder Ray Wilkins warned that United would struggle to fill the gap left by Beckham and Veron.



KLEBERSTON

Abramovich, have dominated the transfer market with a 60-million-pound (94 million dollars) outlay, Ferguson can at least take comfort in the knowledge that title rivals Arsenal have hardly troubled their bank manager.

Gunners boss Arsene Wenger, who has recruited goalkeeper, Jens Lehmann, and two untested teenage defenders, Philippe Senderos and Gael Clichy, has his hands tied by the club's need for cash to fund a new stadium.

But he is far from impressed by Chelsea's spending spree.

"When you have money you can buy, it is as simple as that, but it looks to me that it won't be the end," Wenger said.

"Chelsea must buy a new team coach as well, then, to get everybody on."

Police probe in Roma, Napoli

REUTERS, Milan

Italian police have seized documents from the offices of Serie A club AS Roma and Serie B side Napoli as part of investigations into claims of fraudulent bank guarantees, the Rome prosecutor's office said.

Roma and Napoli along with Serie C clubs Cosenza and Spal are being investigated after accusations their registration applications for the new league season contained false bank guarantees.

The woman whose name appeared on documents relating to Roma's finances, Cynthia Ruia, said her signature had been forged.

"Somebody forged my signature to commit fraud. I can't use any other term," the daily Corriere della Sera quoted her on Thursday as saying.

Ruia was a former employee of Sbc, the company that was presented as guarantor. Sbc have denied giving any guarantees for any football clubs.

The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) and the Rome public prosecutor have both opened investigations into the affair. On Wednesday, police said they visited the offices of Roma and Napoli.

All Italian clubs have to present evidence of sound finances to Covisoc, the sports' financial regulator, before their registration for the season is approved.

Covisoc rejected the applications for Roma and Napoli on July 22, but six days later gave the clubs the all-clear after the presentation of the guarantees.

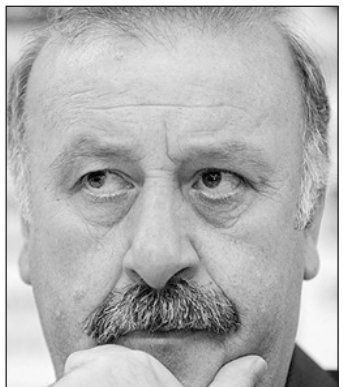
Del Bosque still sour

AFP, Madrid

Former Real Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque, sacked barely 48 hours after leading the club to a record 29th title, says the club have virtually airbrushed him out of their history - even though he won them two Champions League titles.

Del Bosque was dismissed in June and replaced by Portuguese Carlos Queiroz and ABC daily on Wednesday said he felt sore about the whole affair after taking the club to the pinnacle of the world club game by signing the likes of Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo.

"I detect that official club channels



VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

are avoiding making any reference to me," said Del Bosque, who on Tuesday aired several of his grievances in an interview on Basque television channel ETB.

"Real Madrid Television doesn't make any references to those four years (that he was coach) which were marvellous for the club."

But Del Bosque admitted he always knew he would be for the chop one day in a league which hires and fires at will.

"I was always sceptical about continuing at the club for a long time. I know the football world," he explained.

Queiroz, currently with Real on their Asian tour, hinted only this week that he knew the guttoline would likely fall on his own neck one day.

"All I know is that you're born and you die," he told reporters when asked what his own long-term future might hold - though as a manager he might have added that the sack is also eventually part and parcel of every coach's existence.

United made to think

AFP, Lisbon

Manchester United started life without Argentinian playmaker Juan Sebastian Veron with a 3-1 humbling at the hands of Portuguese giants Sporting Lisbon to celebrate the opening of the stadium that will feature at next year's Euro 2004 finals.

Two goals from Portuguese veteran Joao Pinto - both in the second-half - and a first-half goal by Luis Felipe were enough to see off a lifeless United side that relied on a late own goal by Hugo as a consolation.

Even though Veron had left earlier in the day to seal his 15million pounds (24million dollars) move to Chelsea manager Alex Ferguson opted to leave hardman midfielder Roy Keane on the bench along with Dutch hitman Ruud van Nistelrooy.

However even with first choices such as Nicky Butt and Paul Scholes in the starting line-up they were made to look distinctly second rate particularly by Ronaldo - the Portuguese version not the Brazilian World Cup winning striker.