

O'Neill receives OBE

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic manager Martin O'Neill said Wednesday the OBE (Order of the British Empire) medal he received in the New Year's honours list was a reward for everyone connected with the Glasgow giants.

Since taking over from the ill-fated management duo of Kenny Dalglish and John Barnes at Parkhead in the summer of 2000, O'Neill has revived the 'Bhoys' fortunes in spectacular style.

During his first full season in charge Celtic won the domestic treble and last season the club reached its first major European final in 33 years when they were eventually defeated by Porto in the UEFA Cup final.

However, former Northern Ireland midfielder O'Neill played down his own contribution to Celtic's success.

"As a club, Celtic has enjoyed success in the past few years, culminating in the appearance at the UEFA Cup final last summer," he said.

"This recognition belongs to all those who have made a vital contribution to that success and I am honoured to accept it on their behalf."

As a player O'Neill, 51, won a European Cup winner's medal with Nottingham Forest under the guidance of legendary manager Brian Clough. He also played 64 times for Northern Ireland and represented his country at the 1982 World Cup where they recorded a stunning victory over hosts Spain.

After retiring, O'Neill's first management post saw him guide non-league Wycombe into the Football League in 1993.

He then took over at Leicester, keeping the cash-strapped Foxes in the Premiership and taking them to two League Cup wins and European competition.

Porto eyeing Rivaldo

AFP, Lisbon

UEFA Cup holders Porto have joined the chase to sign Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo, who was released by Champions League titleholders Italian giants AC Milan earlier this month, the forward's lawyer said Wednesday.

"Porto has shown interest, but there still is no concrete offer," Jose Carlos Lajes told Portuguese radio TSF.

Rivaldo has been seeking a club since being released by Milan after an unsuccessful 17-month spell.

The 31-year-old joined Milan on a free contract, a month after winning the World Cup with Brazil.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti limited him to just 16 Serie A matches, and eight Champions League games last season, when he only made the bench in the Champions League final against Inter Milan.

This season has been even worse for Rivaldo, who has made only one substitute appearance in the Champions League, and has not played in Serie A.

Porto are looking to repeat their success of the last season when they won the both the Portuguese Cup and Championship, in addition to the UEFA title.

The club currently leads the 18-team Portuguese first division, five points ahead of Sporting Lisbon.

But Porto will have to do without playmaker Derlei for the rest of the season after he injured a ligament in his right knee in a league match against Alverca on December 22.

The 28-year-old Brazilian striker, the top scorer in the Portuguese Premiership, underwent knee surgery on Monday.

Portuguese giants Benfica, who currently lie in third in the league, have reportedly also made a bid for Rivaldo however negotiations have stumbled over wages.

Lippi doesn't want Italy job

AFP, Rome

Juventus' Marcello Lippi has become the latest Serie A coach to rule himself out as a possible replacement for Giovanni Trapattoni, who is expected to step down as Italy coach after next summer's European championships in Portugal.

"It would be an honour for me to take charge of the national team but I have an agreement with Juventus until 2005 and I'm not leaving this club before then," he said.

"The only way that would occur is if they decided to sack me."

"I want to win the Italian title again as well as the Champions League."

Lippi has had two spells with Juventus with whom he has won five league titles and the Champions League in 1996.

On Tuesday Roma coach Fabio Capello said he was not interested in taking the Italy job as he would prefer coaching abroad.

Trapattoni took over from Dino Zoff as Italy coach after the Azzurri were beaten 2-1 in the final of the 2000 European championships by France with a golden goal from David Trezeguet.

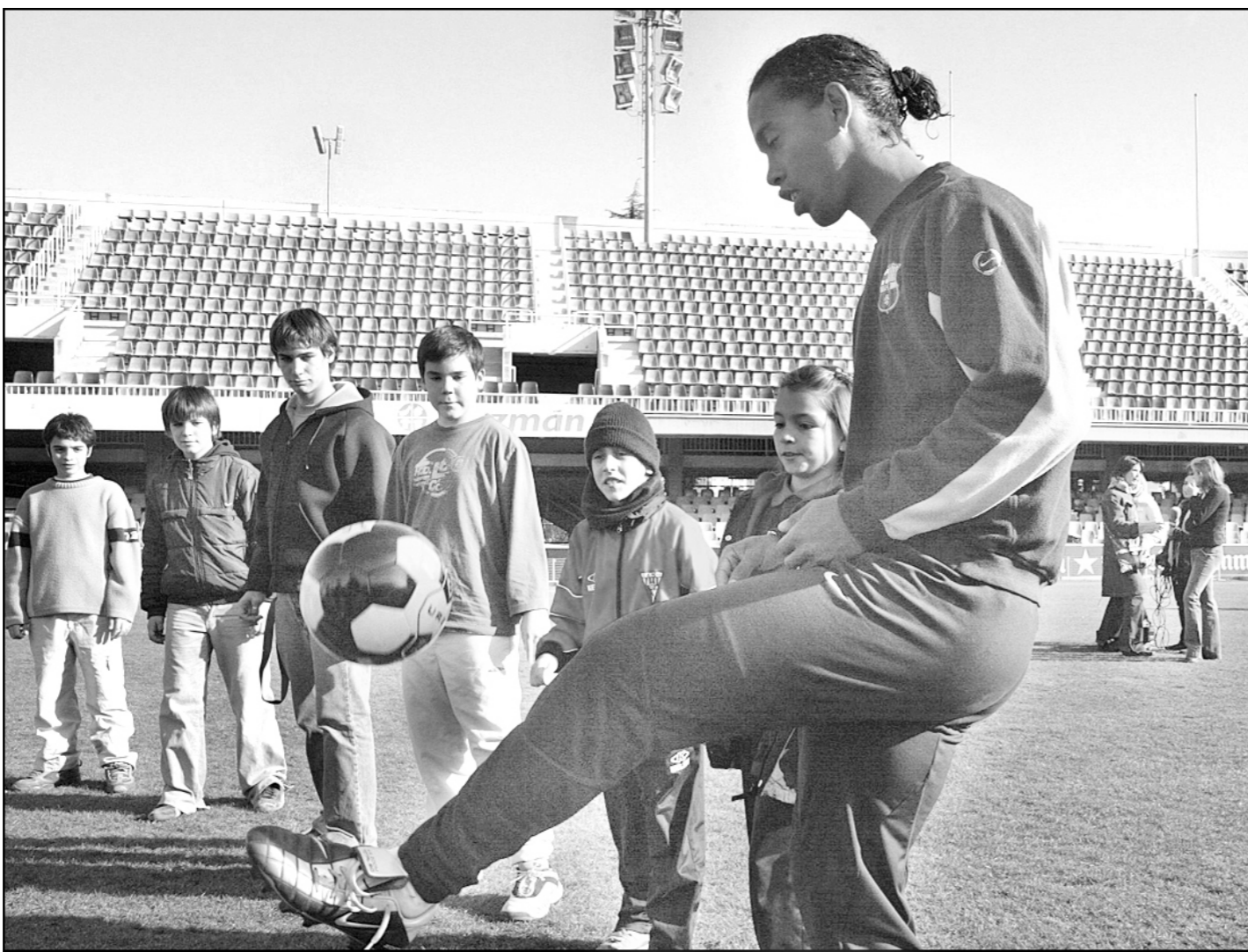


PHOTO: AFP

LEARN MAGIC! Barcelona's Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho plays with children who have donated toys for the "A Dream, a gift" campaign sponsored by the Catalan giants on December 30. The gifts will be given to NGOs working with poor children and infantile hospitals.

Time to start shopping

Football

AFP, Paris

Chelsea's Russian billionaire boss Roman Abramovich will be looking to complete the revolution which he hopes will stake his claim to the Premiership title next summer as the transfer window opens for a month on Thursday.

Abramovich will be looking to bolster the Londoners who are third in the Premiership four points behind Manchester United, after getting their title challenge back on track with a 3-0 win over Premiership newcomers Portsmouth on Sunday.

Their campaign has been given a huge boost this season by the 111 million pounds (191 million dollars) that oil tycoon Abramovich has poured into the club, allowing the acquisition of some of the game's top players, and the spending could continue this month.

Abramovich's hunger for a title could benefit Spanish side Valencia whose Argentine defender Roberto Ayala is being eyed to bolster out-of-favour captain and French international Marcel Desailly.

The names of Inter Milan's Italian striker Christian Vieri and France's David Trezeguet, who has still not extended his deal with Juventus, are also being touted with a move to Chelsea, with Arsenal having already rejected an offer from their London rival's for Thierry Henry.

Real Madrid's Portuguese

midfield star Luis Figo has also brushed aside talk of negotiations with Abramovich.

English champions Manchester United, meanwhile, are also in the hunt for a striker to back up Ruud van Nistelrooy, and have already indicated their interest in Fulham's French forward Louis Saha.

Manager Chris Coleman has turned down a 5.5-million-pound bid from the champions but the west London club's resolve is likely to be severely tested if United come back with a bigger offer once the transfer window formally opens.

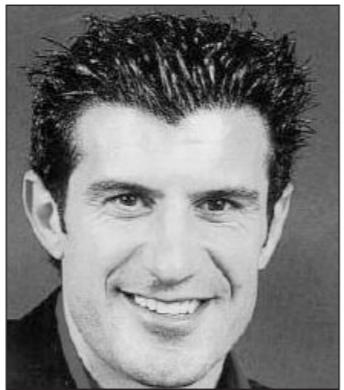
United boss Alex Ferguson has

having not been involved in Europe with their respective clubs this season.

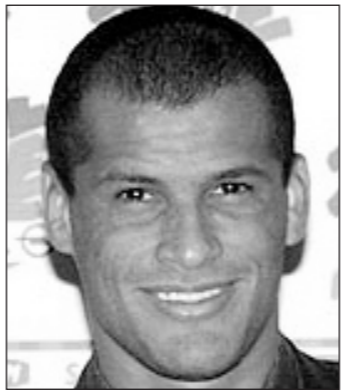
Skipper Roy Keane believes United are in good shape to retain their Premiership title, but could still do with a couple of new players in the squad.

"The spirit amongst the squad is outstanding, but I still think we could do with another one or two players," said Keane.

"When you bring someone in, it gives everyone a lift and I know myself from when the manager buys a midfielder player it makes you step up another level."



LUIS FIGO



RIVALDO

identified Saha as his number one target as he seeks to ensure he has cover for Nistelrooy.

If Fulham hold out, Ferguson is expected to turn his attention to either Leeds' Mark Viduka or West Ham's Jermain Defoe, both players who, like Saha, would be available to play in the Champions League

In France, Marseille are poised to finalise the signing of Manchester United goalkeeper Fabien Barthez who fell out of favour at Old Trafford following the arrival of American keeper Tim Howard and has been training at the club were denied permis-

sion to sign Barthez outside of the transfer window by UEFA, but have been paying part of his wages since November.

"We are going to try to sign him as soon as possible," said Marseille president Christophe Bouchet. "If we can it will be on January 1 or 2 at the latest. We have no time to waste."

Cash-strapped Serie A side Parma, crippled by debts of around 40 million euros, will be hoping to offload some of their stars in a bid put their money worries behind them.

Japanese international midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata, who is the Italian club's biggest salary, could find himself playing in the colours of rival's Bologna next season.

The two-time Asian footballer of the year is reported to be starting off the season on a loan deal at Bologna.

The chase is already on to sign World Cup winner Rivaldo who was released by his Italian side AC Milan last month.

A clutch of clubs are reported to be chasing Rivaldo, but a stumbling block could be his wages. The 1999 FIFA World Player of the Year was reported to be on 215,000 euros (258,000 dollars) a week at Milan.

Rivaldo's agent says they have had three offers from English Premiership clubs and have already turned down an offer of one million dollars a month to play in Qatar. Portuguese giants Benfica are also reported to be interested.

Queiroz's New Year's wish

Football

AFP, Madrid

As befits a club which always sets its sights on the stratospheric, Real Madrid coach Carlos Queiroz goes into the New Year in the belief his men can win everything, including a dream Champions League final with Manchester United.

Real currently top the Spanish table by two points from Valencia despite losing away to their chief rivals and will take on Bayern Munich in a mouth-watering round of 16 Champions League tie in two months time.

"We are in a comfortable position - but so far we have won nothing," Queiroz told Tuesday's Marca sports daily as he sized up the size of the challenges which await the nine-times European champions in 2004.

Six months into his job with the meringues' all-star cast, former United assistant manager Queiroz acknowledged that winning the league, the Champions League and also the Spanish Cup was a tall order.

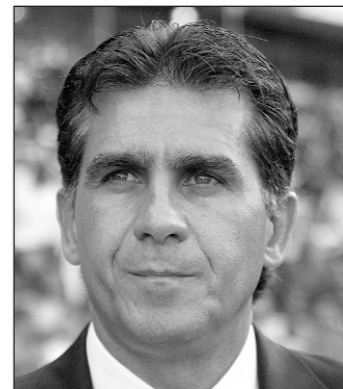
But with predecessor Vicente del Bosque having been dismissed for "only" winning the league title last season, despite netting two European Cups in his four years in

charge, Queiroz knows he has much to live up to.

"The players are motivated and confident. We are on the right track to achieve our goals."

"Things won't be easy. They will depend on injuries, luck, tiredness - everything depends on circumstances."

"We must establish a strategy of



CARLOS QUEIROZ

priorities and make decisions based on those priorities," said Real's Portuguese mentor.

With David Beckham having successfully come through his setting-in phase, Queiroz is now pinning his hopes on a "dream"

Champions League final against the England skipper's former employers.

"It would be a beautiful dream come true and something fantastic to see Real Madrid and Manchester in the final. That's the final I want," Queiroz readily admitted.

"Years ago Bayern against Real Madrid would have been a final. A worse draw could only have pitted us against Juve or Manchester."

Not for the first time Queiroz saluted Beckham's workrate, which has made him a favourite at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

"David's availability has been tremendous. In every match, in every training session, he watches, listens and learns something new."

"His technical and physical qualities to play in the centre have not surprised me after 17 years playing out wide."

"Given his status as a player it was not easy to tell him - 'now, change'. But he was the first to want to lean in a new position. I am very happy with the way he has adapted."

Queiroz added that with Beckham's successful move inside French maestro Zinedine Zidane had more freedom to stamp his class on matches.

Keane missing Ireland role

AFP, London

Manchester United captain Roy Keane said Tuesday he could "still do a job" for the Republic of Ireland despite his dramatic exit from international football.

The former Nottingham Forest midfielder has not worn the Republic's green jersey since he walked out on the squad on the eve of the 2002 World Cup following a furious row with then manager Mick McCarthy.

And last year he announced his international retirement in a bid to help manage his hip problem.

Keane, 32, told the Sky Sports website he was still able to play international football but felt that personal problems with fellow Republic of Ireland international would make it difficult for him to add to his tally of 58 caps.

"I do feel I could still do a job for Ireland. Then again, there are one or two players who I wouldn't fancy playing with because of what happened before," said Keane.

"I watch some of the games and I think I could definitely do a job for the team."

"But because I feel OK in myself now, it doesn't mean I've forgotten what the surgeon told me about how important it is to rest my hip."

Lehmann will attack!

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal's German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann insisted on Wednesday he would not change his aggressive manner in dealing with opposing strikers despite being reported to the Football Association (FA) after the 1-0 win at Southampton. The 34-year-old former international was reported for throwing the football at Kevin Phillips after the final whistle at the end of Monday's match in what had been an ongoing dispute during the game.

Phillips had constantly challenged Lehmann during the clash trying to block his punts upfield and during one exchange at a corner had trod on the German's foot.

Lehmann, however, said being reported to the FA would not alter the way he played or his attitude.

"Arsenal bought me for the way I play, so I can't change," said the former Borussia Dortmund keeper, who was brought in last summer as a replacement for David Seaman.

"Of course I don't want to get booked but I have to protect myself because my game is to get out to crosses."

Lehmann said he was much more than a keeper adding he played like an extrasweeper.

Lehmann defended his actions by saying as the referee hadn't punished Phillips he had decided to take the law into his own hands - the referee Steve Dunn revealed after the match he had been unable to discipline the German because he had already blown the final whistle when the incident took place.

"Phillips pushed me in the back and was standing on my foot and you must be punished for that," said Lehmann.

"But we are football players and this is normal."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger had downplayed the incident after the match.

"He (Lehmann) shouldn't have done it but I don't think he should be punished for it," said Wenger.

"I think he was frustrated many times and was hit a few times in the air."

"He's not used to that when he played in Germany."

Who's the real winner?

Football

WORLD SOCCER

The election of Pavel Nedved as 2003 European Footballer of the Year by France Football magazine has confirmed that readers of World Soccer were again ahead of the game in voting for the Czech midfielder in our annual poll earlier this month.

Nedved has been the outstanding player of the past 12 months, both for his club, Juventus, and his country, Czech Republic. He deserves his accolades in recognition of his achievements in taking Juventus to the Champions League final and captaining his country through a challenging Euro 2004 qualifying campaign.

It is always difficult picking the best player in a non-tournament year, but World Soccer's readers and France Football's journalists have pulled it off.

Their votes have again left FIFA feeling a little embarrassed about their World Player award. Nobody is disputing that Zinedine Zidane, winner of FIFA's award, is a wonderful footballer. Indeed, of the current generation of players, Zidane and Ronaldo are the only ones who will be remembered as true greats, alongside the likes of Pele, Maradona, Cruyff and Platini.

But Zidane won FIFA's award because of his reputation and that of his club, Real Madrid rather than his achievements on the pitch.

It is an alarming trend that Real Madrid players have now won the FIFA award for the past three years running (Figo in 2001, Ronaldo in 2002, and now Zidane, who also won in 2000 while with Juventus).

Many of the national coaches who vote in FIFA's award are seduced by image of Real Madrid as the world's most glamorous club. Zidane has outshone the other Galacticos at the Bernabeu in the past year, so a vote for the Frenchman was the easy, least embarrassing option. But it was far from being the considered, intelligent option. That was Nedved -- by a country mile.

In the Champions League knockout matches -- the stage where individual performances count most in the end-of-year awards -- Real Madrid were beaten in the semifinals by a Juventus team inspired by Nedved. Had Nedved played in the final against Milan (he was suspended) we may have had a different outcome.

Another disturbing aspect of the

FIFA award was the way it was reported in the UK press, who were all convinced that Thierry Henry would win. Nobody was more guilty than the BBC, who led their sports bulletins with the claim that Henry was favorite to land FIFA's gong.

In fact, Henry was nothing of the sort, Arsenal having failed again to reach the Champions League knockout stages. (Ronaldo was actually the bookies' favorite). But the BBC had an interview with Henry on their Sports Personality of the Year Show and used their news bulletin to publicize the interview.

At the BBC these days, they never let the facts get in the way of a good plug for another BBC program.



PAVEL NEDVED

PSV goal-kid for MU?

AFP, London

English Premiership giants Manchester United may be about to answer captain Roy Keane's call for an extra striker by making a bid for precocious scoring talent Arjen Robben it was revealed on Wednesday.

The 19-year-old PSV Eindhoven tyro - whose 16 goals in 48 club appearances have already seen him capped at senior level - could well hold talks with United next week according to his club president Harry van Raay.

"The chance is 50 percent," van Raay replied to the Daily Mirror when asked whether Robben would leave either during the transfer window in January or next summer.

Should Robben move to Old Trafford he would link up with compatriot and prolific marksman Ruud van Nistelrooy in a possible dress rehearsal for next year's first choice line-up for the Euro 2004 finals.

On Tuesday Keane had called for a couple more additions to the squad in January especially in attack as United attempt to retain the Premiership title and regain the Champions League trophy they won back in 1999.

"The spirit amongst the squad is outstanding, but I still think we could do with another one or two players," said the former Republic of Ireland skipper.

"The manager is always looking at the bigger picture but squad-wise we came up a little bit short last year."

"Please God nothing happens to Ruud van Nistelrooy because maybe we are not as strong up front as people think we are."