

SA, Morocco lead African race

2010 World Cup bid

Football

AFP, Zurich

South Africa and Morocco are lobbying hard this week in the corridors of governments and sports federations worldwide looking for the support to become the first African country to host a World Cup finals.

South Africa lost out to Germany by a single vote in the controversial vote for the 2006 finals and is determined it will win the glittering prize this time when 24 of world football body FIFA's most powerful officials make their choice in Zurich on Saturday.

The stakes are enormous - hosting football's showpiece event is worth five billion dollars at a rough estimate and billions more in prestige.

Five nations are bidding, but it has become largely a two-horse race, with Egypt as outsiders and Tunisia and Libya making up the numbers.

South Africa were favourites to

host the 2006 World Cup before football's murky politics and power games took over.

The Oceania representative, Charles Dempsey, abstained in the last round of voting in the knowledge that Germany were leading 12-11 and that in the event of a draw the casting vote goes to FIFA President Sepp Blatter, who was likely to have chosen South Africa.

With Morocco apparently closing fast on South Africa, Blatter fears this vote may be so close that he will have to make that casting vote this time.

"I hope I will not be in that position," Blatter said.

Ever since Blatter decided the 2010 tournament would be in Africa, South Africa have been the front-runners, trumpeting their success in hosting the 1993 Rugby World Cup and the Cricket World Cup last year.

South Africa is also hoping that it will be awarded the finals as a reward for ten years of democracy following the end of apartheid.

Former president Nelson Mandela has agreed to attend the vote to give the bid a last-minute

push in what is expected to be his last major function before withdrawing from public life.

Morocco however has attracted heavyweight support, including from France and Spain, raising fears in South Africa that the Rainbow Nation's hopes could be dashed again.

FIFA's inspectors rated South Africa's bid excellent, but bid chief Danny Jordaan said the favourite's tag was meaningless.

"The lesson we learned from last time is that it's not over until the final whistle," Jordaan said in Kuala Lumpur last weekend, where he was lobbying the four Asian members of the FIFA Executive Committee which makes the final decision.

"A lot of officials from different countries and confederations have said they support us, which is always welcome," Jordaan said.

"But it won't win us the World Cup. What matters is persuading 13 members of the FIFA executive committee that we have the best bid."

Morocco has played up its prox-

imity to Europe as a factor in its favour, allowing European fans and corporate guests to fly in on the day of matches.

Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade will accompany the Moroccan delegation to Zurich, lending the North Africans valuable support from the west of the continent.

"A World Cup in Morocco will be a World Cup for the whole of Africa," said bid chief Saad Kettani.

Morocco also has the experienced guidance of US lawyer Alan Rothenberg, who organised the 1994 World Cup in the United States, the tournament that Morocco missed out on staging by a single vote.

"Everyone had sympathy for South Africa after its failure, but don't forget that Morocco had the same experience in 1994," he said.

Egypt is bidding for the first time and it would be a huge surprise if it got the nod, but as the bid's coordinator Hicham Azmi said: "There are always last-minute surprises in these type of decisions. I hope that this time, Egypt can spring the surprise."



A Thai Liverpool fan chooses souvenir cups at the football souvenir shop in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's media was dominated Wednesday by anger and confusion over signs that the government, rather than Premier Thaksin Shinawatra, could fund the purchase of a stake in glamour club Liverpool.

Valdano rebuffs Becks, Ronaldo rumours

BBC ONLINE

Real Madrid director of sport Jorge Valdano has denied that the club are listening to offers for either David Beckham or Ronaldo.

The pair have repeatedly been linked to Chelsea in big money moves, but Valdano does not want to see them leave.

"We are very happy with Beckham and have high hopes for him next season. His signing has been a success."

"And there is nothing in the Ronaldo story. It's all rumours and he will continue at Madrid," Valdano said.

Real have failed to win any silverware this season and are expected to embark on a rebuilding programme in the summer.

Potential targets include Real Sociedad's Xavi Alonso, Valencia defender Fabian Ayala and Francesco Totti of Roma.

If the club are going to bring in new faces it is expected that they will need to finance the moves by off-loading at least one of their much-heralded Galacticos.

But Valdano is adamant the club will not be saying goodbye to Beckham or Ronaldo.

"It's true that Beckham has had his personal problems, which are connected to the fact that he is a special player for the press, but in our opinion he has generally played at a high level," Valdano said.

Italy's friendly against Tunisia this month

AFP, Rome

Italy will play Tunisia in a friendly this month as part of their preparations for the European championships in Portugal, the Italian football federation (FIGC) confirmed on Tuesday.

The Azzurri will take on the African champions in Tunis on May 30.

The match will be Italy's last before Euro 2004 begins on June 12.

The Italians have been drawn in Group C with Sweden, 1992 champions Denmark and Bulgaria. Their first match is against the Danes on June 14.

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni will name his squad for the quadrennial championships on June

Voeller to name German squad on May 24

REUTERS, Hamburg

Germany coach Rudi Voeller will name his 23-man squad for Euro 2004 on May 24, the German Football Association (DFB) confirmed on Wednesday.

Germany were drawn in Group D with the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Latvia at the tournament in Portugal starting on June 12.

Voeller's squad is largely known but there could be a few surprises. The former Germany striker has been under pressure to make changes since the three-times world and European champions were crushed 5-1 by Romania in a friendly last month in Bucharest.

PSG's hopes dashed

Football

AFP, Paris

Revived French giants Paris St Germain's hopes of clinching their third league title and first since 1994 all but died on Tuesday as a Pascal Feindouno double inspired Bordeaux to a 3-0 victory. PSG did not help themselves as Frederic Dehu and Reinaldo had penalties saved by an inspired Ulrich Rame but it was Feindouno, whose goal against them five years ago at the Parc de Princes grabbed the title for Bordeaux at the expense of Marseille, who made them pay as he doubled his tally for the season to four.

Defeat saw PSG remain three points behind leaders Lyon and one behind Champions League finalists Monaco, but both can extend their advantage on Wednesday.

With only two matches remaining after Wednesday's programme, the Parisians will probably have to content themselves with a Champions League place next season and winning some silverware by beating second division Chateauroux in the French Cup final later this month.



Bordeaux goalkeeper Ulrich Rame stops a penalty kick by PSG defender Frederic Dehu during their French First Division League match on Tuesday at the Chaban-Delmas Stadium at Bordeaux.

Farina to miss stars

Football

AFP, Sydney

Socceroo Harry Kewell has a legitimate injury and remains committed to the national cause despite missing the team's first home matches in two and a half years, coach Frank Farina said on Wednesday.

Kewell is unavailable for the two-match series against World Cup semifinalists Turkey and the following Oceania Nations Cup in Adelaide because of an ankle complaint which prevents him from taking long-haul flights.

Instead, the Liverpool striker is off for a family holiday in the English Premier League off-season.

But Farina, who on Wednesday announced an understrength 20-man squad for the Turkey series minus Kewell and fellow injury victim Mark Viduka, defended Kewell's absence.

"Harry certainly does have a condition. It's been confirmed by Liverpool's medical staff and our medical staff," Farina said.

"We were swept aside and just didn't perform," admitted PSG's Bosnian coach Vahid Halilhodzic.

"I am sad that we should play like that, it is just not PSG's style."

"There were things that didn't please me but we will discuss them," he added.

Feindouno doubled his tally and that of Bordeaux shortly after the start of the second-half as he ensured hardman defender Dehu's night got worse as he wrestled clear of the former Barcelona defender to shoot home for his fourth of the season.

PSG won a penalty when Pauleta was pulled down by Marco Caneira but Reinaldo fired his spot kick almost directly at Rame who saved.

Dehu also gifted Bordeaux their third as his weak header failed to clear the danger and it fell to Marouane Chamakh, who fired home his sixth of the season.

Dehu had already gone from hero to zero for PSG as having scored the winner against Rennes on Saturday he saw his poorly taken penalty in first-half injury-time saved by France international Rame.

"I wasn't sure he would put it there but I had watched him on TV take several so I had a fair idea

where he would put it," said Rame, who had also saved a penalty in their first meeting this season when he stopped Pauleta's effort.

Dehu's miss meant PSG went in 1-0 down thanks to Feindouno's third goal of the season as the Guinea international sweetly volleyed home Franck Jurietti's cross in the 21st minute.

Earlier Auxerre had pressed their claims for a UEFA Cup spot next term with a 3-1 victory over Lens.

They had been briefly pegged back at 1-1 after Yann Lachuer's superb volleyed opener for them in the 22nd minute.

And it was Lachuer, known as Tintin because of his resemblance to the comic book character, that was at the heart of their re-taking the lead as his delicate pass found French Under-21 international Lionel Mathis in the 74th minute, who coolly slotted it into the net.

Mathis turned provider three minutes from time when he set up Liverpool-bound French international striker Djibril Cisse, who notched his 23rd of the campaign with a relaxed sidefooted effort from just inside the area.

Maradona sedated

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona has been put under sedation by doctors in a private drug rehabilitation clinic here on Tuesday after the Argentine football legend raged that he wanted to return to Cuba where he has lived for the past four years.

The 43-year-old wants to check out of the Park Private Clinic where he arrived on Monday, preferring to return to Cuba where he has been fighting his life-threatening drug addiction since 2000.

"(Maradona) had to be sedated after flying into an uncontrollable rage," a close friend told AFP.

"Diego is conscious but he is being given medication and sedated when necessary. He can't leave of his own will."

His lawyer said the 1986 World Cup-winning captain's family "are deciding at the moment what part of the world to bring him to."

"The most important is to get him away from drugs."

Maradona initially spent 11 days in the Suizo-Argentina clinic last month, and his family had difficulty finding another clinic to accept the player.

Cuban leader Fidel Castro is reported to have put an aeroplane at Maradona's disposal should he want to return to the island.

But his personal doctor Alfredo Cahe stated Monday that the Park Clinic was the former player's last chance to beat drugs, although the biggest problem will be getting Maradona to follow his treatment.

The 106-kilogram, 1.68-meter (234-pound, five-foot, eight-inch) former player has been fighting cocaine addiction.

Only Maradona's former wife, Claudia Villafane, his two daughters, Dalma, 17, Gianna, 14, and his parents are allowed to visit.

Doctors will need to lower Maradona's weight, fight his cocaine addiction and its withdrawal symptoms.

The football star is strengthening psychologically and physically, the clinic said adding that Maradona was in "stable" condition and that his heart was being monitored.

Scolari eyes semis for Portugal

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari said their aim was to at least reach the semifinals of the European championships, which will be held on Portuguese soil from June 12 to July 4.

Scolari, who led Brazil to the 2002 World Cup title, told the Diario de Noticias newspaper: "The minimum result I am looking for is that we finish among the top four teams."

"If we reached the semi-finals I would be reasonably happy. To win against Greece (in the opening match) is vital," he added.

Scolari said he was unhappy with the fixture lists just before the tournament. "I am critical of UEFA and FIFA fixture lists," he said, adding he wouldn't have enough time to train with a full squad because of Porto's Champions League final against Monaco on May 26 in Gelsenkirchen, Germany.

"We played against them ten years ago in Japan," recalls Ferguson.

Battle for Liverpool intense

Football

AFP, London

Steve Morgan, the millionaire builder fighting Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra for a major stake in Liverpool, took a swipe at his rival on Wednesday as the power struggle over the club's future intensified.

"If we can get it, good. If not, never mind," he told reporters in Bangkok. "We have to consider what is a suitable price and we will not offer a higher bid. It depends on whether they (Liverpool) want to be our partner or not."

Thaksin met Liverpool chief executive in Bangkok on Monday and declared himself to be a long-standing fan of the club. That will not however prevent him walking away and looking for a link-up with another English club.

"There are many clubs which have expressed interest and want to be our partners," he said.

"If Liverpool agree to our original conditions there will no problem, but if they seek new conditions we will look for new clubs."

Morgan, who was born in Liverpool but lives on the tax-haven island of Jersey in the English Channel, said the money raised by his proposal would largely be spent on new players this summer.

"The capital would go into two pots. I am not sure how the pot will split but I will see the majority going to strengthening the playing squad," he said.

"The transfer window is relatively short. The squad needs strengthening right now. There is no point in Nero fiddling while Rome burns. We need to get on with getting players into the club."

"It is a very easy deal to do, there are no strings attached."

United's new plan

Football

AFP, Manchester

English football giants Manchester United unveiled details Tuesday of a new pre-season tournament which manager Sir Alex Ferguson hopes will help the club's preparations for their Champions League qualifying ties.

The tournament will take place at United's Old Trafford ground on Tuesday, August 3 and Thursday, August 5.

The other teams taking part will be Dutch giants PSV Eindhoven, the former team of United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy, Argentina's Boca Juniors and Japanese side Red Diamonds.

United face PSV first on Tuesday 3 August, before taking on Urawa Red Diamonds two days later but will not play Boca Juniors in the tournament.

Ferguson is familiar with Dutch opponents PSV Eindhoven, but told the United website on Tuesday he would not be underestimating Japanese side Urawa Red Diamonds.

"We played against them ten years ago in Japan," recalls Ferguson.

"And they have a fantastic support there. They have the largest following of supporters in Japan."

"We recognise that Japanese football has progressed immensely in recent years. You have to take them seriously because they take football very seriously now."

Looking ahead Ferguson said

Morgan also denied that he would be unable to work with Anfield chairman Moores. "I disagree with some of the policies of the club in the past but it is not a personal issue," he insisted.

Moores could accept Morgan's proposal, take up some of his rights under the share issue and still retain a controlling stake in the club.

But there would inevitably be tensions between the two men if Morgan were to join the Liverpool board because of their differences over the key issue facing the club: the future of manager Gerard Houllier.

Moores has remained loyal to the Frenchman, despite the slide in Liverpool's fortunes since Houllier delivered the League, FA Cup and UEFA Cups in the 2000-01 season.

Morgan is a long-standing critic of the manager and made it clear his reservations had not been assuaged by the club's recent pick-up in form which has left them on the brink of qualifying for next season's Champions League by finishing fourth in the Premiership.

"The manager has had some success over the last six years but every supporter would have been disappointed to finish fifth last year and hopefully finishing fourth this year," Morgan said.

"We are closer to the bottom than to the top and that has to change. We have got to be fighting for the Premiership title next year."

Liverpool need a point from their final home game against Newcastle on Saturday to secure fourth place. That would also be guaranteed if Newcastle were not to win at Southampton on Wednesday evening.

"It is a very easy deal to do, there are no strings attached."

Carlos prefers Real

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian World Cup-winning defender Roberto Carlos said Tuesday he wants to stay another four years at Real Madrid despite receiving an offer to join big spending English Premiership runners-up Chelsea.

"I would like to sign for four more years here," the 31-year-old leftback told Spanish radio station Onda Cero.

"This week or next, we are going to meet with (general manager) Jorge Valdano and (club president) Florentino Perez to sort out my situation, so that I can go off to play for my country and then take a holiday knowing at least my fate for next year."

Roberto Carlos' present contract with Real expires in June 2005 but the soundly confident of reaching a new deal with Real, despite expectations that there will be changes in playing personnel because the club have failed to win a trophy this season for the first time in five years.

"There will be no problem," he said.

He confirmed that he had been approached by Chelsea, who are set to flex the financial muscle of their billionaire Russian owner Roman Abramovich this summer, but would not comment on reports the English club had promised him a two-million-euro "sweetener" if he did not renew his contract with Madrid.

"I haven't signed anything with anyone," Roberto Carlos said.