

FIFA's refs' project

REUTERS, Zurich

FIFA, determined that the refereeing at the 2006 World Cup finals will be the best ever, are launching an 18-month campaign to ensure the world's top referees are fully prepared for the finals in Germany.

The Referees' Project will begin early next year "to produce consistent world-class performances in all the matches of FIFA's flagship event," the world governing body said in a statement on Wednesday.

The programme will start early next year with the announcement of the 46 candidates who will compete for the final 30 positions in Germany.

The selected candidates will come together for preparatory meetings early next year. These will include theoretical and practical training sessions designed "to set the bar as high as possible for 2006", according to FIFA.

The candidates will also be assessed during 2005 in various FIFA competitions and will be observed throughout the project to assess their performances at international and domestic level.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said: "This unique programme will help us identify, train and prepare match officials for the 2006 FIFA World Cup so that we have nothing but the best referees on the pitch."

There was widespread criticism of referees and linesmen at the 1998 World Cup and although officiating in 2002 was much improved, there were still some highly controversial calls which cost teams crucial goals.

In their official report of the 2002 finals FIFA rated the overall performance of the referees and linesmen as "good".

Mallorca want Cuper

SPORTSLIFE, London

Mallorca are doing their best to lure former Valencia and Internazionale coach Hector Cuper back to the club where he had a spell during the 1990s.

The Argentine coach, who lost the final of the Champions League two years on the trot in 2000 and 2001 with Valencia, lives in Palma and has admitted in the past that he could one day return to the club he coached from 1997 to 1999.

"It would be a dream to sign him but it would be as difficult as to try and bring Samuel Eto'o back to the club," said president Mateo Alemany to Marca although he admitted he had made contact with Cuper's agent Alejandro Camano.

Mallorca sacked Benito Floro on Monday after a poor start to the season which has seen them pick up just five points.

Tomeu Alemany has been put in temporary control for the third time - on the last occasion he replaced Sergio Kresic and helped the club stave off relegation.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona's Rafael Marquez (R) is tackled by Gremen's Sanchez during a Spanish King Cup match in Barcelona on Wednesday.

Spanish King's Cup

Upsets galore

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Holders Real Zaragoza, league leaders Barcelona, champions Valencia and high-flying Espanyol all fell victim to lower-ranked opponents in a night of upsets in the King's Cup on Wednesday.

A weakened Barca, missing the influential Ronaldinho and Deco, lost their first domestic game of the season in a shock 1-0 extra-time defeat by third division Gramenet.

The modest Catalan side produced a combative defensive display to keep their illustrious neighbours at bay and force the game into the extra period.

Midfielder Olles became the hero of the night when he made the most of a momentary lapse in the Barca defence to crack home the winner in the 98th minute.

"We took the game very seriously and I cannot fault the attitude of my players," said Barca coach Frank Rijkaard.

"We had a stack of scoring chances but the ball just wouldn't go

in the net and I have to congratulate Gramenet for such a good tactical performance."

Nine-man Zaragoza slipped to a 2-1 defeat at Gimnastic. Espanyol lost 5-3 on penalties to Terrassa and Claudio Ranieri's Valencia were dealt their fourth defeat in a row when they also lost to a second division side by going down 1-0 at Leida.

Atletico Madrid, Real Sociedad and Numancia all had an easier time with comfortable wins over third division opponents.

Real Madrid had already made it safely through to the second round on Tuesday, England striker Michael Owen scoring his third goal in as many games to help his side clinch a 2-1 win over third division neighbours Leganes.

Zaragoza, who claimed a dramatic 3-2 extra-time victory over Real Madrid in last year's final, got off to a dreadful start against Gimnastic when striker Antonio Pinilla scored from a rebound after just two minutes.

Pinilla's substitute Fernando made it 2-0 after the break and the situation worsened for Zaragoza

when they were reduced to nine men after centre-backs Alvaro and Gabriel Milito were dismissed in quick succession for picking up second bookings.

Midfielder Albert Zapater pulled one back in injury time, but it was scant consolation for the holders who have been eliminated in the first round on five occasions the season after winning the Cup.

Valencia boss Ranieri will find himself under increased pressure after watching a second-string side produce a lame performance against Leida who were the better team throughout.

Midfielder Albert Crusat scored the winner 16 minutes from time when he outpaced the defence, beat keeper Anders Palop to the ball and looped a deflected shot into the empty net.

Espanyol, fourth in the Primera Liga, were the victims of the first upset when they lost 5-3 on penalties to Terrassa, who held their opponents to a goalless draw despite playing much of the second half and all of extra-time with just 10 men.

Germany must play WC opener

REUTERS, London

FIFA has ordered 2006 World Cup hosts Germany to play in the tournament's opening match, dashing the hopes of their coach Juergen Klinsmann who wanted to delay his team's first game to keep the pressure off his players.

FIFA's organising committee made the decision at a meeting in Zurich on Wednesday.

The World Cup's opening match is due to be played in Munich on June 9, 2006. The draw for the group stage of the competition takes place in Leipzig on December 9, 2005.

Klinsmann had suggested that world champions Brazil, who under new rules have to qualify for the 2006 World Cup, played in the opening game instead of Germany, but he said he was satisfied with FIFA's decision.

"We're very happy we can play the opening World Cup game in Munich's new football temple," Klinsmann told Germany's SID news agency.

"We welcome the early FIFA decision, which allows us to firm up our planning for the World Cup."

Either the hosts or the defending champions have traditionally played in the opening match of the World Cup.

France, 1998 world champions on home soil, lost 1-0 to Senegal in the first game of the 2002 tournament in South Korea and Japan.

Bundesliga

Bremen's brilliant escape

AFP, Berlin

German champions Werder Bremen produced the comeback of the season to beat VfB Stuttgart 2-1 with the visitors scoring twice in the final 12 minutes despite being reduced to 10 men.

German international Miroslav Klose and Paraguayan ace Nelson Haedo Valdez struck in the closing stages to turn the match on its head and shock the home fans.

"We had a lot of chances even with ten men," explained Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

"The players were rewarded for all their efforts."

Stuttgart looked to be heading for victory and a return to the Bundesliga summit after French debutant Mathieu Delpierre put the hosts ahead in the 45th minute.

Bremen's Swiss international Ludovic Magnin was then dismissed in the 66th minute for pulling back Christian Tiffert and things look bleak for the visitors.

"After the red card all of our players dropped their work rate by five per cent," fumed Stuttgart coach Matthias Sammer.

"That should never happen."

Bremen showed they will not surrender their title without a fight with Klose netting his seventh goal of the campaign in the 78th minute with a deft back heel.

Substitute Valdez then leapt highest to power home the winner three minutes later in a hectic spell.

"I seem to have the knack of coming on and scoring from the substitutes' bench," confessed Valdez.

West Brom turn to Robson

REUTERS, London

West Bromwich Albion have approached former Newcastle United manager Bobby Robson to become the Premier League club's new manager, Sky Sports News reports.

West Brom, two points off the bottom in 16th place after winning promotion last season, sacked Gary Megson on Tuesday after the manager said he would not renew his contract at the end of the season.

Robson was sacked as Newcastle manager a month into the current season and the 71-year-old former England, Barcelona, PSV Eindhoven and Ipswich chief has said he does not want to retire.

"I had three for the same position, Julio Baptista, (Porto mid-fielder) Diego and Alex," Parreira said.

"But we decided to select Julio as the game will be in Quito."

Parreira recalled full back Gilberto, who plays for Bundesliga side Hertha Berlin, and French-based midfielder Dudu Cearense

"lead the 10-nation South American Cup group with 20 points and are keen to avoid a repeat of the shock 1-0 defeat they suffered on their last visit to Ecuador in 2001."

"It's a complicated game because of the altitude and the opposition," said Parreira.

"We've planned this very well

Serie A

Milan come out blazing

Football

AFP, Rome

Three goals in a vastly improved second half gave AC Milan a 3-0 win against bottom club Atalanta and cut Juventus' lead at the top of Serie A to two points.

Jon Dahl Tomasson, Kakha Kaladze and Serginho were on target at the San Siro after a difficult first 45 minutes for the defending champions.

Juventus however can restore their five point advantage if they win at home to Roma on Thursday.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said he was hoping Roma could do his side a favour by becoming the first team to beat Juve this season.

"At times, football holds many surprises and it's obvious what I'm hoping for," he said.

Inter Milan meanwhile threw away a two goal lead before drawing 2-2 at dark horses Lecce, while Cagliari climbed to fourth thanks to a last-gasp win 2-1 at home to struggling Parma.

Juventus have 19 points from seven matches, while Milan are second on 17. Lecce, who dropped to third, have 15 points, two more than Cagliari and three more than

Inter.

Chievo dropped one place to fifth after seeing their unbeaten record come to an abrupt end with a 2-0 defeat at home to Sampdoria, while Fiorentina, with caretaker coach Sergio Buso in charge following Monday's sacking of Emiliano Mondonico, won 2-1 at Reggina.

Livorno came from behind to snatch a 2-1 victory at Palermo, while Udinese and Siena secured 1-0 wins away to Bologna and Brescia respectively. Lazio halted their poor run of results by defeating Messina 2-0.

Inter increased Inter's advantage in the 34th minute, exchanging passes with Cambiasso before drilling home an angled shot.

Valeri Bojinov hauled Lecce back into contention two minutes later, his left-footed curler from outside the box finding the top corner.

And the 18-year-old Bulgarian doubled his tally soon after the break, squeezing the ball in from an acute angle with little of the goal to aim at.

Inter will be kicking themselves not to have taken home all three points as Adriano missed an easy chance late on, blasting over the bar from eight yards with the goal at his mercy.



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan's Danish international Jon Dahl Tomasson (L) is poised to shoot before Atalanta defender Claudio Rivalta can intercept during their Serie A encounter at the San Siro stadium in Milan on October 27.

No place for Rivaldo

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil have dropped midfielder Alex from their squad for next month's World Cup qualifiers in Ecuador, while Rivaldo's hopes of an international comeback have been put on hold.

Alex, who plays for Turkey's Fenerbahce, was left out following his ineffective performance in the goalless draw at home to Colombia last month.

The left-footed midfielder, enormously gifted but with a reputation for drifting out of matches, was substituted in the second half after starting the game in place of suspended AC Milan midfielder Kaka.

Coach Carlos Alberto Parreira said he had preferred to select Julio Baptista for the match in Quito, which will be played at 2,800 metres above sea level, because the Sevilla players was physically stronger.

"I had three for the same position, Julio Baptista, (Porto mid-fielder) Diego and Alex," Parreira said.

"But we decided to select Julio as the game will be in Quito."

Parreira recalled full back Gilberto, who plays for Bundesliga side Hertha Berlin, and French-based midfielder Dudu Cearense

"lead the 10-nation South American Cup group with 20 points and are keen to avoid a repeat of the shock 1-0 defeat they suffered on their last visit to Ecuador in 2001."

"It's a complicated game because of the altitude and the opposition," said Parreira.

"We've planned this very well

so that the altitude interferes as little as possible.

"This is a very important game for the team to finish the year on a high and start 2005 in good spirits," he added.

"There are no surprises, all these players have been picked by me before."

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Dida (AC Milan/ITA), Julio Cesar (Flamengo).

Defenders: Cafu (AC Milan/ITA), Maicon (Monaco/FRA), Roberto Carlos (Real Madrid/SPA), Gilberto (Hertha Berlin/GER), Juan (Bayer Leverkusen/GER), Roque Junior (Bayer Leverkusen/GER), Lucio (Bayern Munich/GER), Luis Fabiano (Benfica/POR).

Midfielders: Edu (Arsenal/ENG), Renato (Sevilla/SPA), Juninho Pernambucano (Lyon/FRA), Ze Roberto (Bayern Munich/GER), Julio Baptista (Sevilla/SPA), Dudu Cearense (Kashiwa Reysol/JPN), Kleberson (Manchester United/ENG), Kaka (AC Milan/ITA).

Forwards: Ronaldo (Real Madrid/SPA), Ronaldinho (Barcelona/SPA), Adriano (Inter Milan/ITA), Luis Fabiano (Porto/POR)

League Cup

Young Gunners too good

Football

AFP, London

A team of Arsenal fledglings helped manager Arsene Wenger celebrate his contract extension with a 2-1 win over Manchester City in the 29th minute of the League Cup.

Elsewhere Premiership strugglers Southampton came from behind to beat League One side Colchester 3-2.

The Saints twice fell behind to the impressive visitors but under-pressure coach Steve Wigley had 18-year-old striker Dexter Blackstock's first senior hat-trick to thank for a much-needed victory.

At Stamford Bridge, Chelsea beat fellow Londoners and League One side West Ham 1-0 thanks to

Mateja Kezman's first goal for the club in the 57th minute.

American Daniel