

SOUTH AMERICAN QUALIFIERS

Making up for Ronaldo

AFP, Montevideo

Brazil striker Robinho has been a hot topic of conversation in football circles in the run-up to the South American World Cup qualifiers during the next week.

The 21-year-old Santos striker is reportedly about to be snapped up by Real Madrid as Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira considers whether to field him in matches against Paraguay on Sunday and Argentina on June 8.

Superstar Ronaldo is to miss the qualifiers plus June's Confederations Cup, leaving the way open for a possible inclusion for Robinho.

Brazil are second in the 10-nation South American group with 24 points from 13 games, and four points behind leaders Argentina. Ecuador are third with 20 points and Paraguay fourth with 19.

The Real Madrid and 2002 World Cup winning striker Ronaldo asked Parreira to be left out because of the recent separation from his fiancée Daniella Cicarelli.

The squad are training at Granja de Comary, near Teresopolis, 120km north west of Rio for their matches against Paraguay at Porto Alegre and Argentina in Buenos Aires.

Inter Milan striker Adriano, Ricardo Oliveira and Robinho appear to be competing for the two strikers' places even though Robinho does not have a lot of experience at top international level.

Parreira said at his training camp: "Robinho has grown a lot, is very mature and is a good option for us."

Adriano meanwhile realises that Ronaldo's absence gives him the chance to make himself an automatic first-choice player. "I must take advantage to ensure my place in the squad for the World Cup finals. I am going to do everything I



Brazil striker Adriano relaxes in front of the players' cottages at the national team's training base in Granja Comari on Thursday.

PHOTO: CBF WEBSITE

can to make that happen."

Parreira also has to make a choice of two from three central defenders in Lucio, Roque Junior and Juan.

On their match against Uruguay, Parreira said: "It will be a game requiring patience because Paraguay will probably do as they usually do and try to hit us on the break," adding they would be hard to break down as they often play with up to nine in defensive positions.

Meanwhile Parreira has something to prove when they meet Argentina as it has been nearly 10 years since they last won in the Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires.

Parreira has led Brazil against Argentina seven times but only

twice at the Monumental stadium -- when they lost 1-0 in 1983 but drew 1-1 in 1993 -- and he is out to vastly improve those statistics with a win.

Meanwhile Argentina must meet Ecuador in the heights of Quito four days before the Brazil fixture knowing victory would give them one of the four automatic berths into the finals with four matches still to play. The fifth-placed team must play a two-legged play-off to earn their ticket.

That would repeat Argentina's feat in qualifying for the 2002 finals in the Far East with four matches still left to play after beating Ecuador 2-0 in Quito.

Argentina are expected to rest several players against Ecuador to enable them to be fresh for the

Brazil fixture.

Coach Jose Pekerman said he is likely to include many of the players which beat Bolivia 2-1 in March in the heights of La Paz. A three-man defence of Leandro Cufré, Gabriel Milito and Walter Samuel is likely with a strike duo of Luciano Galletti and Carlos Tevez, though Luciano Figueroa has a chance.

Pekerman might choose a midfield of Lionel Scaloni, Lucas Bernardi, Esteban Cambiasso and Kily Gonzalez, with the talented Pablo Aimar also an option.

In an attempt to acclimatize to altitude, Argentina will fly to Guayaquil on Friday and spend the night there before travelling to the 2,800m-high city of Quito on the Saturday.

Kaka engaged!

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

AC Milan midfielder Kaka was forced to turn down a marriage proposal from an admiring fan who swears she has become an evangelist because of the Brazil international, who shares the same faith.

The admirer, Cristiane Sampaio from Rio, was given the chance to meet her football hero after watching the Brazil team's training session here on Wednesday ahead of their World Cup qualifier against Paraguay on Sunday.

And the 20-year-old made sure she made the most of her time with the talented and handsome midfielder by asking him to marry her.

However Kaka was forced to reply: "I can't, I'm already engaged."

The offer of an autographed Brazil training shirt did not seem to appease Sampaio, who loves the player so much she has a tattoo of him.

"I'm Kaka's angel. I became an evangelist because of him," complained Sampaio.

Kaka could only reply: "It was a funny meeting -- she doesn't even know me and she wants to marry me."

Kluivert Valencia's surprise

AFP, London

Dutch striker Patrick Kluivert has agreed to join deposed Spanish champions Valencia, subject to a medical it was announced Friday.

According to the club's website, the former Barcelona and Newcastle hit-man has agreed a three-year deal to return to Spain.

"Valencia have reached a preliminary agreement with Dutch player Patrick Kluivert for the next three seasons with an option for an additional year," the statement said.

"He will arrive on a free transfer and has agreed to the deal but this will only be effective if the player passes his medical that will be administered on June 9."

Kluivert, Holland's record goalscorer, suffered an inconsistent season in England after arriving at St James' Park on a free transfer from the Nou Camp.

The 28-year-old started only 14 Premiership games for the Magpies, scoring six times, but still managed to finish as Newcastle's second highest scorer overall, with 13 goals, six behind Alan Shearer.

Newcastle had an option for another two years on the Dutchman's contract but declined to keep him.

Valencia, the 2004 Spanish league and UEFA Cup champions, are rebuilding after they fell apart last season and finished seventh following coach Rafael Benitez's departure to Liverpool.

Sergi calls it a day

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid defender Sergi Barjuan on Friday announced his retirement from the sport, thus ending the possibility of a late career move to the English Premiership.

"I've thought long and hard about the possibilities on offer to me, but I've decided it's time to leave football and concentrate on my family," said the 33-year-old.

Sergi played 12 seasons in the Spanish top flight, the majority of which were with league giants Barcelona.

A former regular with the Spanish national side in the 1990's, Sergi won 56 caps. In his nine seasons with Barcelona he won three league titles (1994, 1998, 1999), two Spanish Cups (1997, 1998) and a European Cup winners Cup (1997).

His love for the Catalan club appears not to have waned - and he evoked the hope of re-joining Barcelona as part of their coaching staff if the offer was made.

Stuttgart fire Sammer

AFP, Berlin

VfB Stuttgart on Friday announced the sacking of their coach Matthias Sammer, who failed to lead the club into next season's Champions League.

Stuttgart finished fifth in the Bundesliga after a rally by Werder Bremen in the final stages of the league allowed the 2003/2004 champions to finish in third place ahead of Hertha Berlin.

Following a meeting with Sammer, Erwin Staudt, the president of the club, said: "After our unsatisfactory end to the season we felt we needed to make some real changes. We want to start afresh."

A replacement for the 37-year-old Sammer, a former Germany midfielder who had previously coached Borussia Dortmund, has not yet been named.

Sammer arrived at the club only at the end of last season as a replacement for Felix Magath, who went to Bayern Munich as a replacement for Ottmar Hitzfeld.

Sammer's contract was set to run until 2007.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

Istanbul set for a cracker

AFP, Paris



Historical rivals Greece and Turkey will meet in a potentially explosive World Cup qualifier this Saturday which, given Turkey's precarious situation in Group Two, could also serve up a goals feast in Istanbul.

Turkey sit third behind Greece and surprise leaders Ukraine, but have a chance to leapfrog their near neighbours and thus relaunch a qualifying campaign which, having begun ominously, is still hanging by a thread.

Just as Greece have been on a high since being crowned European champions last year, Turkey's third place finish at the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea has created an air of expectation -- but one which is beginning to weigh heavily.

If Otto Rehhagel's Greece side win their encounter in Istanbul, they will inch closer to the top of the group while for Turkey -- who claimed just six points from their first five matches -- it could be game over ahead of their next qualifier four days later in Kazakhstan.

On paper, Turkey can boast the best record from the three encounters they have played although given what is at stake those matches could be considered irrelevant.

For the record, Turkey have never lost against Greece, winning their first ever match -- a friendly in 1988 -- 3-1 and returning from Athens six months later with a 1-0 victory.

The sides' next encounter, 15 years later and in the current qualifying campaign, ended in a scoreless draw at the Karaiskaki stadium in Piraeus last September.

Given their need for a win, Turkey -- who lead the group in scoring on 13 goals -- can't afford to play for a draw.

Rehhagel said: "We must give a special performance in the matches against Turkey and Ukraine in order for us to get as many points as possible and keep second place."

Asked if a draw against Turkey would be a positive result the German added: "It would be so, because we will get to keep the two points distance. Even in terms of pure mathematics, anything is possible, even with regard to the first place."

Ukraine meanwhile have turned out to be the group's surprise pace-setters.

Formerly part of the Soviet Republic Ukraine host struggling Kazakhstan in Kiev on Saturday having stormed their way unbeaten to the top with five wins from seven games.

Observers might feel tempted to point to the presence of AC Milan striker Andriy Shevchenko -- however Ukraine, who are bidding to secure World Cup finals qualification for the first time having come close on the last two occasions, are far from being a one-man show.

Given their unbeaten record so

far, it is only right that goalkeeper Alexandr Shovkovski gets some of the credit.

Shevchenko was absent for the 1-0 win against Denmark in Kiev on 30 March as Shovkovski kept another clean sheet for Oleg Blokhin's ambitious side who have leaked only three goals in seven games.

Elsewhere, the Republic of Ireland can further boost their hopes of qualifying from a tight group four with a victory over Israel -- although coach Brian Kerr will be asking his players to be vigilant until the final whistle.

Israel, who sit second in the group behind only on goals difference to France, have surprised a few of their group rivals recently by scoring late equalisers to claim a valuable share of the points.

France, Ireland and Cyprus have all succumbed to late equalisers in the last five minutes of their match against the Israelis.

Ireland will have studied their opponents carefully, and will be hoping their record of not having lost a World Cup qualifier in Dublin since October 1993 stands firm in what is effectively a game in hand over France and Israel.

Kerr, at the helm since January 2003, has only lost two of his 27 games in charge. Both were away from home, and he has reiterated the need for a home win on Saturday.

"This is a game we should win, and if we do win then it would be hard for them to retrieve the situation in the group," said Kerr.

"That makes this a crucial game, particularly from our point of view, this is an absolutely crucial game."

The same could be said for their near neighbours Scotland, whose qualifying campaign is in dire straits. Walter Smith's men have only two points from four games and face Moldova at Hampden without key midfielders Nigel Quashie and Gary Caldwell through injury and suspension.

Keeper Rab Douglas is also out injured, while Manchester United winger Darren Fletcher said despite his fears over missing pre-season he will play through the pain of a hamstring injury.

"I would be willing to take the risk this time around but only on the condition that I am not going to do too much damage," said Fletcher.

"I have a new season to think about with my club. If I tore a hamstring and was out for six or seven weeks that would mean I miss pre-season with Manchester United."

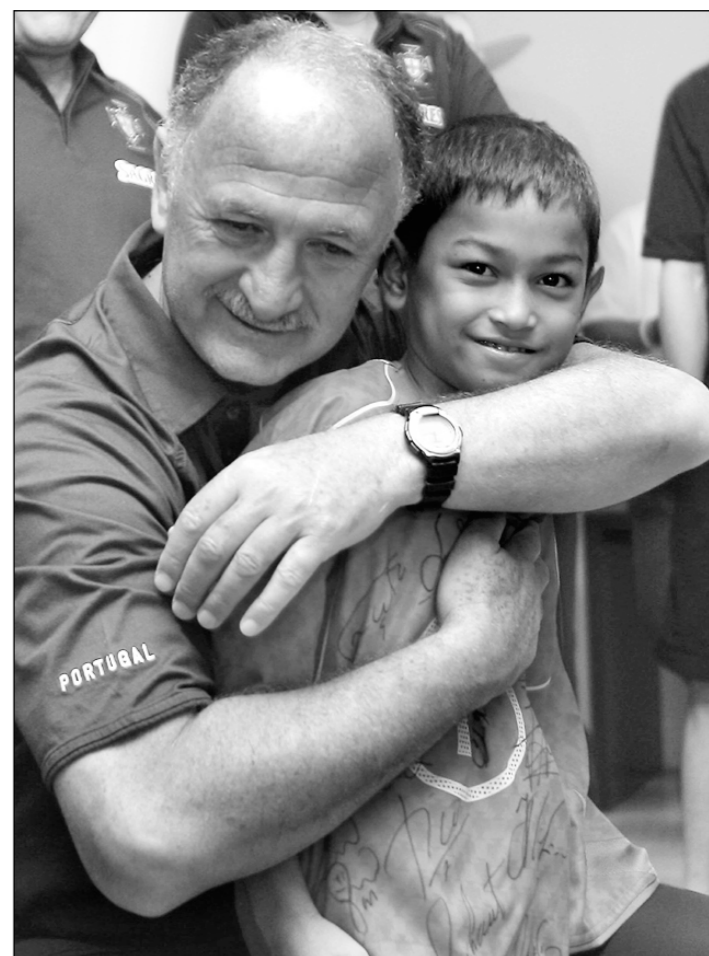


PHOTO: AFP

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART: Martunis (R), a 7-year-old Indonesian boy is embraced by Portugal national coach Luis Felipe Scolari (L) in Lisbon on Thursday. Martunis, who was wearing a Portuguese jersey when he was rescued in the Indonesian province of Banda Aceh, following December's deadly tsunami, was invited to Portugal at the inspiration of star player Luis Figo to attend the team's match World Cup qualifier on Saturday and to meet his idols.

Van Nistelrooy committed

AFP, Manchester

Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy has pledged his future to Manchester United despite growing rumours he is on his way to Spain.

Some reports have claimed the prolific forward has become disillusioned with life at Old Trafford following a frustrating season riddled by injuries.

There was even talk of a swap deal involving Barcelona hit-man Samuel Eto'o who is said to be similarly at odds in the Catalan capital.

But 28-year-old van Nistelrooy has re-iterated his desire to stay at United.

"There is no question I want to stay here, I'm committed to United," he told the BBC website.

"It wasn't my best season, I know that myself, but this is where I want to be, it's the most important thing for me."

Van Nistelrooy's season was ruined by a succession of injuries including an Achilles problem that kept him sidelined for three months.

He scored just six Premiership goals as he struggled to find his form whenever he came back into the side.

But van Nistelrooy believes that was because he was rushed back too soon in order to play in the Champions League tie against AC Milan.

Beckham has Asian plans



AFP, Los Angeles

David Beckham said Thursday he hopes to launch an Asian version of the David Beckham Academy by 2007, a sister facility of his first two football schools in London and Los Angeles.

"We are looking at possibly two more (academies) in Asia next year or the year after," Beckham said during a news conference in Los Angeles to unveil plans for the California school.

Beckham did not go into details about his Asia plans but it is clear he has global aspirations for his football academies.

Asked what Asian countries they are targeting, his publicist Simon Oliveira would only say, "We are looking at the usual suspects" including China.

The 30-year-old Beckham launched plans for his Los Angeles academy at a standing room only news conference Thursday at the Home Depot Center.

The 150 million dollar stadium is located just 10 miles southeast of downtown, and with flashbulbs popping, the circus atmosphere was intensified by a swarm of Hollywood paparazzi in attendance.

me a lot. In my career things happen. I never thought I would leave Manchester United. There is an opportunity to come to America, and I am thinking about it," Beckham said.

Asked if he would play for an English club again, he said, "I am happy in Real Madrid. I have a long-term contract there. I won't go to play in England again."

Beckham did express disappointment at not winning any trophies in the two years he has been with Real Madrid.

"I haven't won anything the last two years and that has never happened to me before," said Beckham, who signed a 25 million pound deal with Real Madrid in 2003.

AEG president Tim Leiweke is hoping their long-term marketing deal with Beckham Inc could one day entice England's favourite son to move Stateside.

"It would be great to have the world's most popular football player," said Leiweke, who is also backing Beckham's other academy on the Greenwich Peninsula in east London where AEG is building an arena and entertainment district.

"David has a long-term partnership with us and so to leave (Spain) would be up to him. We would love to have him in the future."

"Playing in America does interest

DIV I SOCCER

Rahmatganj extend lead

SPORTS REPORTER

Rahmatganj Muslim Friends Society maintained their solo lead in the First Division Football League with a solitary goal victory over Victoria Sporting Club at the Bir Shreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday.

Zakir struck the match-decider in the 69th minute.

With this win, Rahmatganj improved their tally to 13 points from five matches while Victoria remained on eight from same outings.

Nat'l youth volleyball

SPORTS REPORTER

Comilla, Rajshahi, Chuadanga and Dinajpur moved into the quarter-finals of the City Bank National Youth Volleyball Championship winning their respective matches at the Mirpur Shaheed Suhrawardy Indoor Stadium yesterday.

Dinajpur beat Sherpur 25-13, 25-21, 25-14, Chuadanga defeated Naogaon 25-22, 25-22, 20-25, 13-25, 15-09, Khulna overpowered Narail 25-22, 22-25, 25-16, 25-21 and Tangail outplayed Comilla 26-24, 20-25, 25-20, 16-15, 15-12 points.

A tough Ashes battle

Ponting's men fly to England today



AFP, Sydney

The Australian cricket team leaves Saturday in the quest for an unprecedented nine Ashes series wins but consensus gives England its best chance of wresting back the urn in 18 years.

Many commentators rate Ricky Ponting's Aussies the best cricket team of all time -- even England captain Michael Vaughan concedes Australia's greatness -- but there's a certain respect that perhaps England might just give them a run for their money.

In 306 Tests between cricket's two traditional great rivals, Australia has won 125 to England's 95, with 86 drawn.

But such is Australia's dominance that since regaining the Ashes on the 1989 tour of England, the Aussies have won 28 of the 43 Tests with England claiming seven.

The Australian team Friday wound up a week's training camp in Brisbane, and Ponting is enthused about the challenges ahead in the July-September Test series.

"There's been a really exciting feeling around the group having been away from each other for a while and having not played cricket for seven weeks, and everyone's really fresh and keen and raring to go," Ponting said.

Ponting said a resurgent England would ensure a close Ashes contest this northern sum-

mer. "We've said that about the Ashes before and it hasn't been," Ponting told reporters.

"But I think this England side have a different feel to them."

"If you watch the way they play and how they've gone about their cricket, they have a bit of a winning habit and winning culture which they haven't had for a while."

England have been making progress during the past 12 months, winning four straight Test series as well as setting a new national record of eight successive wins.

Australia have most of the biggest names in contemporary Test cricket: Ponting, Shane Warne, Glenn McGrath, Adam Gilchrist, Matthew Hayden, Damien Martyn, Jason Gillespie and Justin Langer.

Four of the batsmen -- Ponting (56.50), Gilchrist (55.65), Hayden (53.46) and Martyn (51.25) -- average above 50 per innings and the top three in the batting order, Hayden (20), Langer (21) and Ponting (22), have a combined total of 63 Test match hundreds.

Australia possess two of the greatest all-time bowlers with leg-spinner Warne the record holder with 583 wickets in 123 Tests and paceman McGrath fourth all-time with 499 wickets in 109 Tests.

McGrath's wife Jane, children and his parents are all planning to be at Lord's for the first Test of the series (July 21-25) when he vies to become the fourth Test bowler to 500 wickets behind Warne, Muttiah Muralitharan and Courtney Walsh.

"To be involved in three Ashes tours in England is something pretty special and to have the opportunity to take my 500th Test wicket at Lord's you couldn't ask anymore than that," McGrath said.

Jason Gillespie, who shares the new ball with McGrath, is no slouch either with 248 wickets in 66 Tests, while Warne's wrist-spin understudy Stuart MacGill weighs in with 160 wickets in just 33 Tests.

Gilchrist, who many claim is cricket's greatest all-rounder with 15 centuries and 287 dismissals as wicketkeeper in 68 Tests, is the danger lurking for England's bowlers, coming in at No. 7.

There are three newcomers in Australia's 16-man Ashes squad with reserve batsman Brad Hodge, young fast-bowling firebrand Shaun Tait and wicketkeeper back-up Brad Haddin.

Hodge, who averaged 63.64 for Victoria last summer, has English county experience currently with Lancashire, while selectors are investing in the potential of 21-year-old tearaway Tait.

Tait has been rewarded for a competition-topping 65 wickets for South Australia in Sheffield Shield last summer, an all-time state first-class season record, at an average of 20.16.

Haddin, who led NSW to this year's Shield title with two centuries at an average of 57.25, is the back-up to Gilchrist.

Australia's opening tour game is a one-dayer against Leicestershire at Grace Road on June 11.

Henin, Pierce driven

FROM PAGE 12

nothing short of miraculous, having returned to tennis only in April after a knee fracture.

"It's amazing to reach the final after what's happened to me over the last few months," she said.

Henin-Hardenne, who celebrated her 23rd birthday on Wednesday, has endured three-set marathons in three of her six rounds here and had to save two match points to get past US Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova in the round of 16.

"I am getting tired, I have played a lot of tennis," she said.

"My legs are feeling heavy, my back is not getting any better but it's not getting any worse. I need one more effort and then I will take a rest."

Henin-Hardenne is favourite heading into the final but Pierce

believes it may be her fate to triumph a second time in her mother's homeland.

"I believe in myself, and the few people that believe in me that I have in my life have really helped me a lot to get where I am," the 30-year-old said.

"And, you know, that's why I'm here today, it's because I had something inside of me when I had my injuries that was telling me, 'You know, you're not done. There's still something for you to do in tennis, still some things for you to accomplish'."

"I don't know what that meant. I don't still know what that means today. It could be the results on the court, it could be something else."

Born in Canada to an American father and a French mother, Pierce has needed that inner belief throughout her turbulent career.

Early on she suffered the indignity of her father Jim being banned by the WTA Tour for his bad behaviour -- he would sit court-side screaming obscenities throughout her matches.

She was mocked by the French for her American accent and jeered for her preening behaviour.

Still a teenager when she reached her first final at Roland Garros in 1994, her Spanish conqueror Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario was crowd favourite.

But slowly she won over the critical French public and six years later she became the first Frenchwoman to win the tournament since Francoise Durr in 1967 and won the heart of the nation.

Were she to win on Saturday, her place in French sporting history would be sealed.

The Lord's Syndrome

FROM PAGE 12

Bashar b Harmison 6 Ashraf c G Jones b S Jones 3 Saleh c Thorpe b Flintoff 2 Aftab c G Jones b Harmison 6 Mashud c G Jones b Harmison 22 Rafiqe c Batty b Hoggard 9 Baisya c G Jones b Hoggard 0 Mortuza c G Jones b Harmison 1 Anwar not out 0 Extras: (lb-2, w-5, nb-4) 11 Total: (All out in 39.5 overs) 104 Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-27, 3-34, 4-42, 5-59, 6-69, 7-87, 8-87, 9-93.

Bowler O M R W Hoggard 12 6 24 3 Harmison 12.5 2 38 5 S Jones 8 2 26 1 Flintoff 7 3 14 1</