

Vieri fuels Sampdoria speculation

AFP, Rome

Monaco striker Christian Vieri has reportedly e-mailed crisis-ridden Italian club Sampdoria expressing his interest in a move to the Serie A side, the club claimed on their website.

Vieri joined Monaco from AC Milan in January in a bid to find regular first team action and boost his chances of a World Cup spot.

But the 32-year-old, who has 49 caps for the national side and played for Italy at the 2002 World Cup, had to sit out this year's tournament after injuring his left knee in French league action last month.

And speculation has been rife in the Italian press this week that Vieri could be bound for the Genoa side next season after Monaco signed Czech striker Jan Koller on a two-year deal this month.

"This morning we received an e-mail from Christian Vieri. The striker expressed his desire to wear our jersey," the club said on their website.

Vieri wrote: "I'm a Sampdoria fan and recently I'm been reading a lot of journalistic indiscretions concerning an eventual transfer of the player Christian Vieri to your club. I hope that you succeed in concluding negotiations. Warmest regards, Christian Vieri."

Meanwhile, Italian football federation (FIGC) investigators on Friday interrogated Sampdoria president Riccardo Garrone as the club have been implicated in the country's match-fixing scandal.

Health scare for Nakamura

AFP, Bonn

Japanese playmaker Shunsuke Nakamura gave the Japanese camp a scare on Friday when he went down with a cold two days ahead of the crucial World Cup tie against Croatia.

Nakamura played in an internal practice match Friday after spending two days training by himself due to a pain in his right thigh which, he bruised, in the Asian champions' 3-1 defeat to Australia in their World Cup opener on Monday.

The left-footed 27-year-old, who has just renewed his contract with Scotland champions Celtic, showed little effects of the injury but returned to the team hotel without talking to reporters.

"He has a bit of a cold with his body temperature reaching 37.2 C (98.9 F). But we think he will be alright for the Croatia match in Nuremberg," team spokesman Ichirota Fukushima said.

He was to travel with the rest of the team to Nuremberg later in the day as scheduled, Fukushima said.

Nakamura, who had been a doubt before the Australia match because of a painful left hamstring, scored Japan's goal in the Australia game with his speculative cross floating over a goalmouth scramble and into the net.

He was earlier hampered by a slight cold and suspected hay fever for several days since the Japan squad arrived for their training camp here late last month.

Both Japan and Croatia, who lost to five-time champions Brazil in their opener, needed to win their second match in order to keep themselves well in contention for a spot in the second round.

Ahn eyes

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"We will need every player to help out in defence - even me," grinned the attacking midfielder. "France are a very strong team but we are confident (going into the game). We have experience of playing against top European teams in the 2002 World Cup and that experience will help us.

"Nobody knows what will happen in football but we can do it. I hope we can win - if we win we can enter the second round."

Spurs wing-back Lee Young-Pyo, who man-marked Luis Figo out of the game in South Korea's win over Portugal four years ago, downplayed suggestions that he might be assigned the role of shackling Arsenal striker Thierry Henry.

"I played well against him (Figo) but against France we will be defending as a unit," he said. "France are very strong and if we play our best we have a chance but we cannot guarantee a win. But the situation is very good for us. We won the first game (against Togo) and even if we lose against France we still have to play Switzerland."

Wolves' winger Seol Ki-Hyeon did not play any part in the first game but said he was confident of doing a job against France if called up by Advocaat.

"I have scored a goal against France (in the 3-2 loss ahead of the 2002 World Cup)," said the rangy Seol. "If there is a chance (for me to play) I will do my best. I am ready."

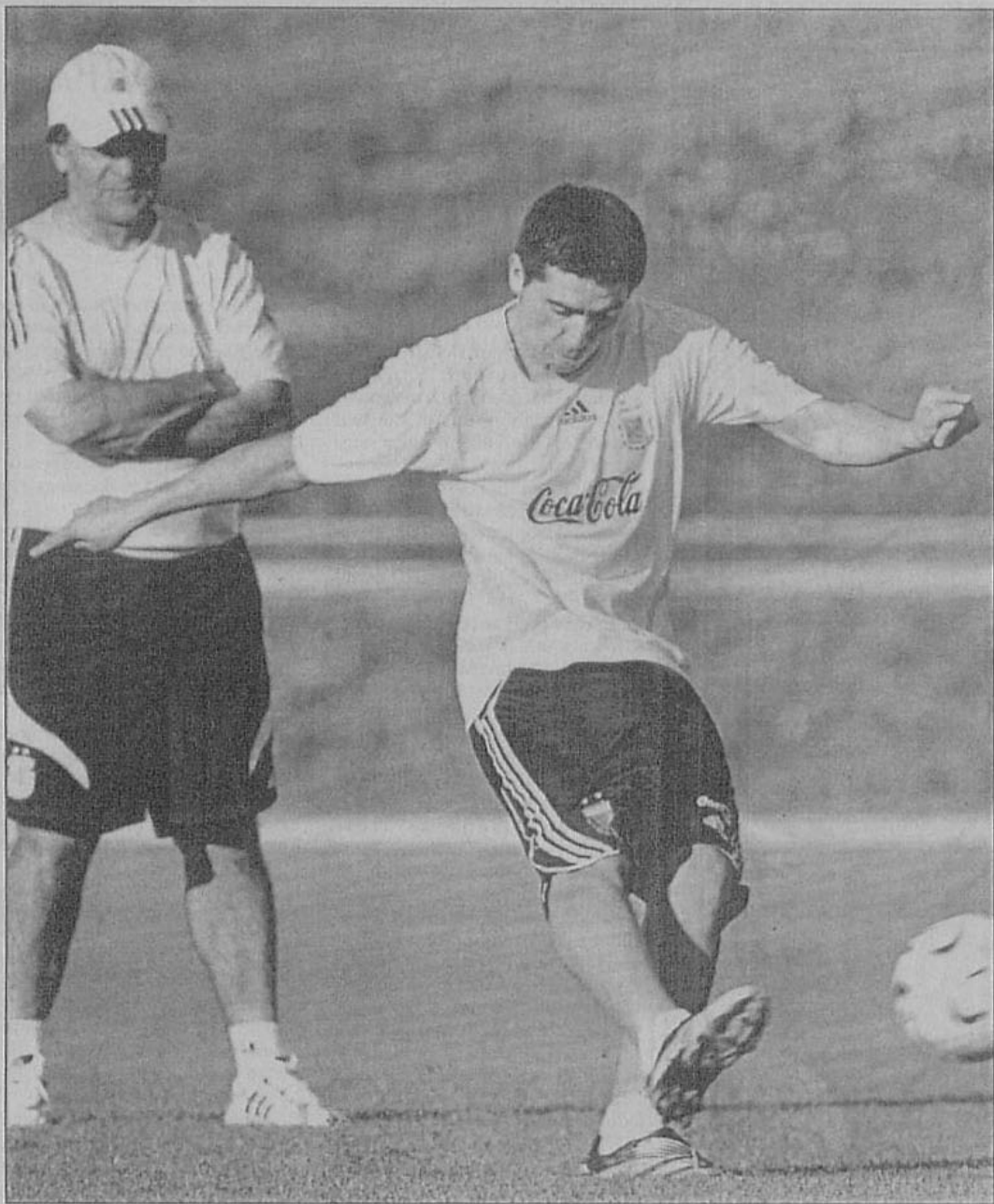


PHOTO: AFP

Argentina's midfield maestro Juan Roman Riquelme(R) shoots the ball in a training session at Adi-Dassler-Sportplatz training camp in Herzenaurach on Wednesday.

The artiste and architect



AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Argentina's artistic midfielder Juan Riquelme seemed like a discrete presence in the 6-0 drubbing of Serbia-Montenegro but it was enough to earn the Man of the Match award in a game brimming with talent.

"It was not easy to choose the Man of the Match because there were several very good players, but we thought that Riquelme had a tremendous influence for Argentina," FIFA jury member Roy Hodgson explained.

"In an Argentine team that played very well, he always asked for the ball. His ability and passing vision were fundamental factors in the great attacking performance that we were presented with here today," Hodgson added.

While fellow midfielder Maxi Rodriguez scored twice, forward Javier Saviola scurried around the pitch, Hernan Crespo darted around the goalmouth, Carlos Tevez powered past opponents, or Lionel Messi ran rings around defenders, Riquelme just cantered, looked around and passed.

Despite the praise, the quiet

Villarreal player said things could get better.

"I just hope that Argentina can go on improving and can go on and do better each time," he said after the match.

"Today we're very happy because of what we've done, but our intention is to keep growing as a team."

Riquelme - who will turn 28 later this month -- is one of coach Jose Pekerman's favourites. The long-legged player uses his left foot to pass or shoot like an artist creates a painting with strokes of the brush.

He revealed only a glimpse of that inspired playmaking in the opening match against Ivory Coast, but that was enough to be behind most of the few chances that Argentina created.

Riquelme split the "Elephants" defence with a languid, almost casual pass to put Saviola clear to score Argentina's second goal.

Against Serbia Montenegro on Friday, Riquelme fed the Seville forward again to set up a fluid cross-field movement from the left that was completed by Esteban Cambiasso.

But the long-legged Riquelme needs space to think and find passing opportunities, and he is vulnerable without defensive cover or attacking alternatives from the rest of Argentina's left-sided players.

He was caught lingering with the ball at least once against Serbia-Montenegro, losing possession and leaving his teammates in an awkward position.

ward position.

However, Pekerman, a successful former youth team coach, has an eye on the whole team.

He often pairs Riquelme with captain Juan Pablo Sorin, an attacking wing back and clubmate at Villarreal in Spain, or the tougher midfielder Javier Mascherano.

In Argentina's 3-1 qualifying victory in the traditional derby against arch-rivals Brazil in Buenos Aires one year ago, Riquelme's parsimonious style shone against the flamboyant Brazilians.

His reading of the game also helped his club through to the semi-finals of the Champions League in May.

But Riquelme can prove to be fragile under pressure.

After his first division debut for trophy winning Boca Juniors in 1996 he caught Barcelona's eye. But Riquelme struggled with the Spanish club and was loaned to the less prestigious Villarreal, where he eventually stayed.

That fragile nature emerged in the club's elimination from the Champions League, when Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann saved his last-minute penalty.

Argentine observers say the style has changed little from that of the teenage Riquelme in his neighbourhood team, as a technically gifted midfield playmaker who obstinately refused to be rushed.

Fast starts are good omens

INTERNET, undated

All five of the teams that have clinched spots in the second round -- Germany, Ecuador, Argentina, Netherlands and England -- won their opening match. All five eliminated teams -- Ivory Coast, Serbia-Montenegro, Poland, Costa Rica and Paraguay -- lost their opener. Of the 23 teams that won their opening match at the 2002 and 1998 World Cups, 20 advanced to the second round. Of the 23 teams that lost their opener, 22 failed to advance. Only Turkey in 2002 managed to lose its opener and reach the second round. The Turks lost to Brazil, tied Costa Rica, then beat China and advanced to the knockout round on goal difference. Once there, they excelled, and ended up finishing third.

Gerrard vows for improvement

AFP, Baden-Baden

England midfielder Steven Gerrard admitted that his side have no chance of winning the World Cup unless they improve quickly.

The 26-year-old Liverpool captain scored England's second goal as they booked a place in the last 16 with a 2-0 win over minnows Trinidad and Tobago in Nuremberg on Thursday.

But Sven Goran Eriksson's side struggled to overcome unfancied Trinidad for long periods before finally scoring twice in the final minutes.

England had made hard work of beating Paraguay 1-0 in their opening match and the lacklustre display against the 'Soca Warriors' fuelled fears they will crash out as soon as they face stronger opposition.

Gerrard, who lifted the FA Cup trophy last month a year after inspiring Liverpool to the Champions League trophy, knows England will not win the tournament on current form and told BBC Sport as such.

"No, I don't think so, our form as a team has got to improve," said Gerrard, who missed the 2002 edition because of injury and had a poor Euro 2004.

"We need to hit top form pretty quickly. There are still a couple of years to go into it."

"It's pleasing to be in the last 16. It was really difficult out there for an hour and we were finding them really difficult to break down."

Gerrard insisted he wants to play in England's final Group B match against Sweden on Tuesday, even though another booking would rule him out of the second round clash against Germany or Ecuador.

"I think I should," he said. "I want to play in every game but I would have to be sensible."

"It's a question (if he starts or not) that you would have to ask Sven-Goran Eriksson."

Bosses under pressure

AFP, Sydney

Australian bosses came under pressure Saturday to give bleary-eyed Socceroos fans a day off work next week after Australia's early morning World Cup clash with Brazil.

With football fever gripping the nation, thousands of fans are expected to flood the streets of Sydney and other major cities for the match, scheduled to kick off at 2 am local time on Monday (1600 GMT Sunday).

Interest in the game has surged since the Socceroos came from behind to beat Japan 3-1 this week -- a surprise victory that sparked street celebrations across Australia.

ABI State Chamber, Australia's largest business lobby group, said companies should be flexible and allow staff to take a rostered day off or a day's leave.

Regional manager Mary Doherty said doing so could foster goodwill between employees and management and boost workplace morale.

'We need flair'

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Zidane, Henry and company could wreak.

"We have heard a lot of stories about France but that team has so much quality," he commented.

"In principle, if they play the way they can play, it will be very difficult for us."

Advocaat is expected to play a defensive 4-3-3 formation designed to hit France on the break through talismanic striker Ahn Jung-Hwan, who came off the bench to grab the winner against Togo, or Manchester United attacking midfielder Park Ji-Sung.

Hopefully France has not a good day and we have a very good day. That is what I hope," said the former Dutch coach.

"It is quite simple - everybody expects that France will win, so there is no reason for our team to be nervous. They just have to go out and play their game."

His only injury concern involves veteran defender Choi Jin-Cheul, who is struggling to be fit after a left knee injury suffered in the win over Togo.

Eastern hopes fading fast



AFP, Berlin

Thank God for the Czechs is the cry from the former Eastern bloc after a disastrous set of results so far at the World Cup which signals a further decline in their once powerful footballing fortunes.

It has been the Czechs over the past decade that have kept the eastern flag flying though only in the European championships where they reached the final in 1996 and the last four in 2004.

Bulgaria and Croatia both reached the last four of the World Cup in 1994 and 1998 but the former side has slipped alarmingly and along with former World Cup stalwarts Russia and Romania did not even make it to the football festival here.

Now Serbia and Montenegro and Poland have joined them in World Cup exile as they exited in humiliating fashion from the first stage -- while Croatia and Ukraine's hopes are not looking rosy after their first matches.

While the ageing Czechs go into battle with Ghana on Saturday buoyed by an impressive 3-0 open-

ing win over the United States the remainder have been left licking their wounds.

None more so than the Serbia and Montenegro side, playing together for the last time before they separate.

They came to Germany with high hopes of making it through Group C or the group of death having conceded just one goal in the qualifying section.

However the 6-0 demolition by Argentina exposed their limitations brutally and left the former eastern bloc countries, aside from the Czechs, with a record of played five won none, scored none and conceded 14.

Serbian coach Ilija Petkovic while unselfishly putting down the Argentine humiliation to himself said that the difference between the qualifiers and the finals was immense.

"It's another story. They are two different things entirely, playing the qualifiers and the finals," said the 60-year-old.

"Perhaps we weren't capable of handling it," added Petkovic, whose campaign was riven with internal disputes beginning with when he tried to draft his son into the squad but he had to back down.

Poland had a proud record in World Cup finals prior to the defrosting of the Cold War -- twice

semi-finalists -- but managed the singular feat this time round of exiting at the same stage as in 2002.

"Of course I made mistakes," said embattled coach Pawel Janas, a member of the 1982 semi-finalists' side.

"Only people who do nothing make no mistakes."

"What I could do, I did. Maybe someone could have done better but, sorry, I did it my way," added Janas, who has been lambasted in the press and by fans back in Poland.

Croatia at least have got the hardest match out of the way, and the manner in which they lost 1-0 to defending champions Brazil suggests that the final group match against Australia will be the decider as to whether they progress or not.

However the high hopes of Ukraine after they qualified easily have been shattered by the opening 4-0 thrashing by Spain and they may be thankful that the other two teams in the group Tunisia and Saudi Arabia are not exactly heavyweights.

Perhaps the best summation of the former Eastern bloc's frustration at their lack of success at the World Cup in recent times was reflected in a poll taken in Russia prior to the event of who would win it -- six per cent of those polled said Russia would.

France were tensed



REUTERS, Hamelin

France felt pressure in their World Cup opener because they feared a repeat of their 2002 fiasco, defender Willy Sagnol said on Friday.

"You cannot imagine how much tension there was," Sagnol said of the climate in the team before Tuesday's dull 0-0 Group G draw with Switzerland.

The players were nervous because all were thinking about France's shock 1-0 defeat by Senegal in their first match in the finals four years ago, the Bayern Munich defender told reporters.

"That failure against Senegal was still on our minds," he said. "We feel a lot better now."

After losing to Senegal, France had drawn with Uruguay and lost to Denmark and they were eliminated without a win or a goal from the group stage.

"Our situation now is a lot better than in 2002," Sagnol said. "We haven't lost and we know we have a strong defence we can rely on. That's vital if you want to win the World Cup."

The 1998 champions must now step up a gear when they face South Korea on Sunday in Leipzig if they are to survive a group also featuring Togo.

"We know we must play faster and take more risks but I'm sure we will be more and more competitive," Sagnol said.

The 29-year-old said he had been hurt by media criticism of the team and notably by remarks about the players' age.

"If we are a team of pensioners, then AC Milan are good for nothing," he said.

The mood in the team, Sagnol said, was much better than in 2002 and was one of the reasons why France could justifiably feel optimistic.

"We enjoy being together and it's getting better all the time," he said. "It would take more than a draw with Switzerland to spoil the atmosphere."

Four years ago, France stayed at an impersonal luxury hotel in the centre of Seoul while this time, they are living in a magnificent castle in the northern German countryside.

"This is a lot nicer," Sagnol said. "In 2002 we felt trapped. We could not go anywhere without bumping into a journalist who would ask us questions."

"Here, it's different. Of course we feel lonely at times. You get tired of eating and drinking football but you want to see your kids but that's all right. We know what we're here for."

Time-out for cricket



AP, Rotenburg

As soon as practice ended Friday, Stern John broke out the cricket bat and began a lighthearted game with his Trinidad and Tobago teammates.

Shouts and laughter rang out as bowlers threw tennis balls to the batters. Not quite the scene one would expect the day after a heart-breaking World Cup loss in the final minutes to England.

Then again, few experts expected that the Soca Warriors would still have a chance to make it to the second round of the World Cup heading into their final first-round game.

"They called us in the beginning the Cinderella team and we had nothing to look for in this tournament," coach Leo Beenhakker said Friday. "You see how the team managed to play against two big European teams. They can be proud of themselves."

Trinidad and Tobago were less

than 10 minutes away from their second straight 0-0 draw on Thursday before England's Peter Crouch scored on a header in the 83rd minute. Steven Gerrard added another goal in injury time and Trinidad and Tobago fell 2-0.

"Coming into the World Cup everyone thought that we'd be the whipping boys and lose every game heavily," midfielder Chris Birchall said. "We've done the country proud."

The Soca Warriors have one point in Group B from the draw in the opener against Sweden. They need to beat Paraguay next Tuesday and hope England beats Sweden in order to finish in a tie for second place with the Swedes with four points. Then it would go to goal differential to see who advanced to the second round.

"That's what we talked about this morning after cleaning out some disappointment. It is still not over," Beenhakker said. "We know what we have to do. The first thing we have to do is beat Paraguay. We will do everything we can to do that and go for it. Hopefully we will have a situation where England will do its duty and beat Sweden. We don't have it in our own hands but the

things we do have in our hands we will try to do."

Trinidad and Tobago has shown the ability to play tight defense around the goal in its first two games -- getting strong goalkeeping from Shaka Hislop, marking the opposition's best scoring threats and even capitalizing on some breaks when the opponents missed the target.

But Beenhakker's team has not been able to create many chances of its own.

Trinidad has only 13 shots and five on target in the first two games. Cornell Glen hit the crossbar for the best chance against Sweden, and John's header was cleared off the line by England defender John Terry in the second game.

If Trinidad and Tobago is going to have any chance to advance, it needs to be able to score against Paraguay.

"I told them from the beginning that always get two or three opportunities in a match," Beenhakker said. "You just have to have patience and use the 90 minutes to try to do something nice in front. We had some opportunities, but you have to be a little bit lucky of course."



PHOTO: INTERNET

Trinidad and Tobago striker Stern John (R) bats while goalkeeper Shaka Hislop does the wicketkeeper's job during a practice session in Rotenburg on Friday.