

Togo stick with Pfister

REUTERS, Lome

Togo have retained German Otto Pfister to lead their 2008 African Nations Cup qualifying campaign, the country's FA said.

Pfister briefly walked out on his team at the World Cup finals in Germany after a pay dispute involving the players.

Togo lost all three matches on their debut at the World Cup finals but federation president Rock Gnassingbe told Reuters late on Friday that Pfister would be retained for the qualifying round of the 2008 Nations Cup to be staged in Ghana.

"We have taken that decision and Otto Pfister has no problem with it," he said.

Togo's participation in Germany was overshadowed by the pay dispute that followed the squad's initial demand for 155,000 euros (195,900 dollars) per player -- a hefty sum for a country with average per capita income of well below 1,000 dollars.

As the players haggled with the Togolese Football Federation Pfister stormed out before a ball had been kicked, saying he could not do his job.

He returned in time for their first fixture against South Korea which they lost 2-1. They also lost to Switzerland and France.

Pfister, who had already coached eight national squads, was hired in February after Togo's dismal performance at the African Nations Cup in Egypt, on the proviso that he would only be retained if the team produced "good results" in Germany.

Roma target Trezeguet

INTERNET, undated

Juventus may be forced into selling David Trezeguet to Roma.

New coach Didier Deschamps had been hoping to keep hold of Trezeguet or loan him out as a last resort.

However, he may have to rethink his plans with Roma reportedly preparing an audacious 20-million-euro (13.7-million-pound) offer for the 28-year-old.

Trezeguet has also been linked with a move to The Premiership and Juve officials may be tempted to wait for as long as possible to see if any bids are forthcoming from England.

The mass exodus out of Juve is expected to continue with the departure of Patrick Vieira this week, with Internazionale inching ever closer to agreeing a 13-million-euro (9-million-pound) deal with the midfielder.

Lilian Thuram, meanwhile, is to put the finishing touches on his move to Barcelona on Monday.

The French defender, along with Gianluca Zambrotta, agreed to join the European champions from Juventus earlier this week.

He is currently on a charity tour in Africa but will travel to Spain on Monday to take his medical and finalise a two-year deal.

European fears for Wenger

THE GUARDIAN

Only a day before Arsenal play their first game at the 390-million-pound Emirates Stadium, Arsene Wenger has cast doubt over whether the team will qualify for this season's Champions League.

Arsenal play the first leg of their qualifying match in just under three weeks but the World Cup has ruined the manager's pre-season planning. Thierry Henry and Jens Lehmann will have been back for less than a week after their post-World Cup breaks and 11 of the first-team squad will not have taken part in even half of the club's pre-season preparations.

"I think by August 19 (the start of the Premiership season) we will be ready but for the qualifier we might be a bit short," Wenger said. "We have to work hard but there are still people away on holiday."

Players who were involved in the World Cup have been given time off according to how far their teams progressed, with four -- Tomas Rosicky, Kolo Toure, Emmanuel Eboue and Emmanuel Adebayor -- training alone because they are behind the others. Still to report back at Arsenal, aside from Henry and Lehmann, are Ashley Cole, Theo Walcott, Freddie Ljungberg, Robin van Persie, Gilberto Silva, Cesc Fabregas, Jose Antonio Reyes, Johan Djourou and the injured Philippe Senderos.

Arsenal can ill afford a Champions League slip-up now that they have moved to the Emirates Stadium, which opens its doors tomorrow for Dennis Bergkamp's testimonial match. "We're conscious that they have placed great trust in us," said Wenger. "We believe we have a great team that is capable of challenging for the championship and Champions League in this stadium."



Arsenal's Dennis Bergkamp was one of the most eye-catching players of his generation.

Ode to the non-flying Dutchman

Football

ERNST BOUWES

In my days as a student I only once managed to visit the old Stadium de Meer, home of Ajax, for a league game. It was the era of Johan Cruyff as coach and the season in which they would win the European Cup Winners' Cup.

On a nice autumn afternoon in 1986, FC Den Bosch were trailing 2-1, when Jan Wouters chipped the ball into the penalty box for Marco van Basten to score with a bicycle kick, perfectly placed into the top corner.

Even the biggest whiners in the crowd -- there was even a rumour in the 50s and 60s that a third of the public at Ajax came to see them lose -- rose in unison to acknowledge the brilliance of the goal.

Van Basten's marker Cees van der Linden even had the picture of Van Basten hanging in mid-air prominently in his house with himself looking almost in awe to see visitors how close he was to this magnificent shot. He might have ruined it by marking the top European goalscorer of 1986 closer, but he did not and we have to thank him for that.

When Ajax beat Lokomotiv Leipzig 1-0 in the Cup Winners' Cup final in Athens later that season Van Basten had already signed a contract for AC Milan and would never play in the red and white again.

As a replacement Ajax brought in Frank Stapleton from Manchester United, but just four weeks after Van Basten has scored that cracker against FC Den Bosch a skinny schoolboy from the youth team entered the dressing room to join the squad for the home game against Roda JC.

"Hello, I am Dennis Bergkamp," he said as he shook hands with his new teammates before coming on as a substitute in the second half. Though out of line with the Ajax tradition of the scoring debutant, he would make more than a century for them in the next six years before, via Inter, almost singlehandedly making Arsenal popular again.

Comparing Bergkamp, who retired at the end of last season, to Van

Basten is something Dennis does not like. "Van Basten was a different player," he said in an interview. "Marco played deeper, which I never did. I am not such a goal poacher and have other qualities like the assist. I am not one to lurk somewhere in the box and look for that last touch on the line."

In 1991, Louis van Gaal created a new position to accommodate Bergkamp in his team: the shadow striker. As a number 10 he was the ideal link between midfield and striker and they were his most successful seasons as a goalscorer.

Amazingly since, he has not scored as many goals in one league season apart from the 16 in Arsenal's Double year in 1997/1998. However, where only a couple of Van Basten's 200 league goals in a ten-year career will be remembered, almost every single one of Bergkamp's stands out.

At Ajax he had an almost twin-like understanding with midfielder Wim Jonk. A nod or the blink of an eye was enough to bring the ball from the foot of Jonk to a vacant space somewhere in the box where Bergkamp suddenly emerged to score.

Between 1990 and 1993 he averaged 25 league goals, more than half of which came as result of a double act between the two. No wonder Internazionale were interested in signing them both.

It did not work in Italy though, remembers Bergkamp: "The team should play a pressing game, but our first friendly was a disaster and manager Osvaldo Bagnoli immediately went back to his former defensive system."

Although Inter did win the UEFA Cup in his first Italian season, Bergkamp hit the target only 11 times in two Serie A seasons. The partnership with Jonk did not suit the Italian style.

He explained the wonder goal at Leicester, the equalizer in the closing minute with which he completed a hat-trick, on the DVD with 100 of his Arsenal goals. According to the master himself, taking the long pass from one foot to the other, while keeping the ball in the air, controlling it and then finishing with a deft touch was what he had in mind.

I always believe that all goals in football history can be repeated by some lucky punter on a village pitch, but of some of Bergkamp's I am not so sure as they need so much skill and vision. We may never see the likes of such a player again.

While on World Cup duty with England in Germany.

Duff joined Asier Del Horno on his way out of Stamford Bridge on Friday after Chelsea agreed to sell the Spanish defender to Valencia.



DAMIEN DUFF

Magpies 'steal' Duff

Football

AFP, London

Damien Duff is to join Newcastle United from reigning English Premiership champions Chelsea, subject to a medical, the north-east club announced Friday.

"The board of Newcastle United plc are pleased to announce that contracts have been exchanged with Chelsea Football Club for the transfer of Damien Duff," said a statement on the St James' Park side's official website.

"The player having agreed terms, is currently undergoing a medical."

Republic of Ireland winger Duff, 27, also attracted interest from Tottenham and Liverpool.

He joined Chelsea in a 17 million pounds move from Blackburn in 2003 but his place in the first team was threatened by the pre-season signing of Germany skipper Michael Ballack.

Chelseas were unwilling to sell Duff to London rivals Tottenham for seven million pounds but were ready to deal with another Premiership side for a higher price given they already had the likes of Joe Cole, Shaun Wright-Phillips and Arjen Robben battling for wide positions.

"I like Damien as a player and as a person. I listened to him for a couple of hours and I could understand what he has in his mind," Jose Mourinho, Chelsea's manager, said earlier this week.

"After that it becomes business. He's such a good player we will do good business with another club."

Del Horno heads for Valencia

AFP, London

English Premiership champions Chelsea on Friday agreed a deal to sell Spanish defender Asier Del Horno to Valencia.

Del Horno, 25, has travelled to Spain to discuss his contract with Valencia and will complete the move

providing he agrees terms and passes a medical, the official Chelsea website reported.

The former Athletic Bilbao left-back, who missed the World Cup through injury, joined Chelsea for eight million pounds last summer, but struggled to make an impact.

Blues manager Jose Mourinho recently said he was ready to sign a full-back if Del Horno left and his departure could open the way for Chelsea to bid for Arsenal's unset-tled England star Ashley Cole.

Mourinho, speaking at the launch of the club's new kit on Thursday, refused to comment on speculation linking him with Cole but did say Chelsea would buy a replacement should Del Horno leave.

"Ashley Cole is an Arsenal player. It's not correct to say anything about him," he said.

"But if Del Horno goes back to Spain we will need a good left-back. The transfer window is open and for sure we'll have two left-backs."

Milan resist Kaka offers

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid and Chelsea are ready to bid big in order to land Kaka, but Milan insist he is untransferable.

The Spanish giants have been linked with the sensation since before the World Cup, while the London club have now apparently joined the race.

Real are understood to be

willing to spend £40m on a transfer fee and offer the Brazilian a seven-year deal worth £5m a season.

"If they want a meeting to discuss a transfer then they may as well spare themselves the travel costs," stated Milan sporting director Ariedo Braida when asked about Real's interest in the starlet.

"With their pressure on Kaka they have only received our indignation. We have said that Kaka is not for sale and I continue to repeat that."

As if to underline that point, reports in Spain on Saturday are suggesting that Milan have also snubbed a Stamford Bridge approach.

The Premiership champions have supposedly had a £70m offer rejected for the player who recently extended his Milan deal until 2011.

Chelsea have already brought in two high profile players this summer in the form of Bayern Munich's Michael Ballack and Milan's Andriy Shevchenko.

The Ukrainian signed prior to the World Cup Finals after a fee of almost 31 million pounds was agreed between the clubs.

Kaka arrived at the San Siro in

2003 in a 6-million-pound switch from Sao Paulo and has enjoyed three superb seasons in Italy.

The Blues have agreed a fee -

thought to be £4.8million - for Del Horno who has travelled to the Primera Liga club to thrash out personal terms.

Cannavaro looking forward

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Italy's world Cup-winning captain Fabio Cannavaro has said he is looking forward to the challenge of helping Real Madrid get back to winning ways next season.

"I can't understand how a team as big as Real have not won a title for so long (three years)," Cannavaro told the Spanish sports daily Marca on Saturday.

"They are the biggest and the best and will return to being winners. I have signed for them to win things and to help Real be even bigger."

On Wednesday the Primera Liga club said they had agreed a deal with Juventus for the 32-year-old centre-back and his Brazilian teammate Emerson.

"Real are the type of club where you are expected to win every game. For a player who wants to be the best it is stimulating to feel the pressure to defend their interests," he said.

Cannavaro will link up with his former coach at Juventus, Fabio Capello, who swapped Turin for Madrid earlier this month.

"He is a demanding coach who is always looking to be the best," he said.

"He has the experience and know how to turn a team into champions. It is good we have him but we will have to work hard because it won't be easy."

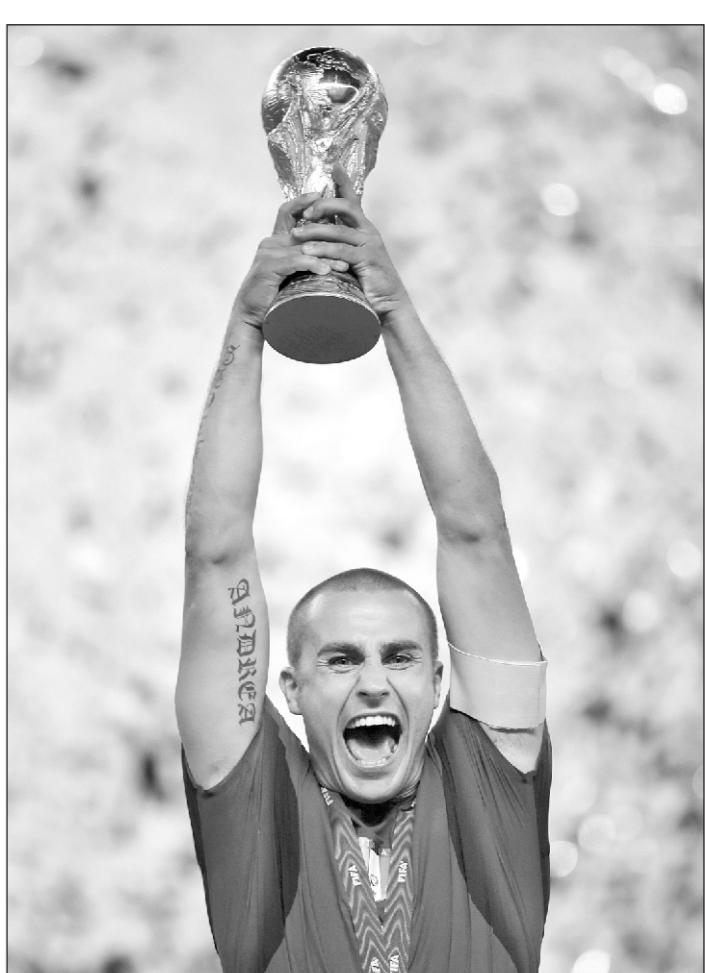
Cannavaro's presentation is being planned for Wednesday.

Real's Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos is expected to resolve his future with the club early next week with Spanish

media putting Olympique Lyon's French international Eric Abidal in the frame as a potential replacement if he leaves.

Real are reported to be still

chasing Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy, despite Manchester United rejecting their last offer, and AC Milan's Brazilian mid-fielder Kaka.



FABIO CANNAVARO

Ali Daei gets the boot

Football

AFP, Tehran

Veteran Iranian captain Ali Daei has been given the boot from the national squad, Iran's new coach

said Saturday as he made the first change to the team following its lacklustre World Cup performance.

"Since there will be changes in our playing system, I did not invite Ali Daei," Iran's new coach Amir Qahenoi, who took over a week ago from the Croat Branko Ivankovic, told the official IRNA news agency.

He was explaining Daei's absence from a list of 40 footballers

to be trained before the Asian Cup finals in 2007.

Germany, where Iran was knocked out in the group stages after losing Mexico and Portugal and drawing against Angola.

Daei's club career includes stints with Bayern Munich and Hertha Berlin. He now plays for Iran's Saba Battery. Off the field he has his own line of sportswear, and has said he would like to pursue a coaching career, preferably in Iran.

Iran's upcoming fixtures -- all qualifiers for the Asian Cup finals -- include a home match against Syria on August 16, against South Korea in Seoul on September 2 followed by an away clash against Syria on September.

Qahenoi did not say who was likely to replace Daei as captain.

Essien likes competition

Football

INTERNET, undated