

## Justice prevails

AFP, Skopje

Macedonia's most celebrated player Darko Pancev received French sports daily L'Equipe's "Golden boot" prize as best European striker here Friday 15 years after originally being awarded the honour.

Pancev, who scored 37 goals in the 1990/1991 season for Serbia's Red Star Belgrade, was prevented from collecting his award at the time after a protest from Cyprus which claimed one of their players had scored 40 goals.

But after a lengthy inquiry L'Equipe rejected the Cypriot football federation's appeal and Pancev, 41, was finally handed the Golden Boot by French football legend Michel Platini.

Platini, who is among the candidates to succeed Lennart Johansson as president of European Football's governing body UEFA, said: "The award, although delayed, is now in the right hands."

One of the best strikers to come out of the former Yugoslavia Pancev joined Red Star Belgrade in 1988, scoring 84 goals for the Serbian champion in a four-year spell.

He retired in 1997.

## Ronaldinho happy at Barca

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona star Ronaldinho brushed aside media reports of interest from AC Milan on Thursday by saying he was very happy at the Nou Camp.

"I feel very happy" at Barcelona, Ronaldinho told the Barca website amid reports that AC Milan were ready to break the bank for him.

"Right now I'm not thinking of anything but Barca," said the Brazilian playmaker who led the Catalan club to the Champions League and the Spanish title last season.

Ronaldinho, now in Mexico with Barca on a pre-season tour which will take them on to the United States, denied knowledge of a potential Milan move for him but said simply: "It's always good to know a big team with great supporters likes you and admires you."

## Grosso relishing Inter challenge

INTERNET, undated

Fabio Grosso is looking forward to his Inter experience and hopes it will be as exciting as this summer's World Cup in Germany.

The newly-signed full-back arrived in Brunico on Thursday to start pre-season training, although most of the Nerazzurri are in Amsterdam for the four-team tournament which includes Ajax, Manchester United and Porto.

"There are very few of us here, but we are all very close and we are training to recover our best condition," the 29-year-old told Inter Channel.

"We are waiting for our teammates to join us after the tour in Holland and Great Britain, so we can give life to the Inter that the club and our fans are expecting."

Grosso signed his new contract with the Via Durini outfit before the World Cup and is delighted to have landed at such a prestigious club after his Palermo stint.

"I was immediately very happy of my choice, but then had to focus completely on the Nazionale," added the Azzurri hero.

"Now I can fully enjoy the pleasure of being here." Grosso played a vital role for Marcello Lippi's side in Germany and accepts that he'll never forget that magical feeling on being crowned a world champion.

"It was more than any of us could dream of, this experience will always be in my memory and we entirely deserved it," he added.

"I now hope that the adventure I am about to begin with Inter will be just as wonderful."

Speculation suggests that Grosso could be joined in Milan by Fiorentina striker Luca Toni, but the stopper was cautious when responding to questions on his international colleague.

"Toni is a good friend," he stated. "I have shared special moments with him in Palermo and with the Azzurri, but I play for Inter and he has a contract with Fiorentina."

"We have spoken recently, but our conversations were not work-related. Maybe we will play together again in the future, but that is not for me to decide."



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson (R) smiles with goalie Edwin van der Sar during a press conference in Amsterdam on Thursday. Manchester United Club will participate in a tournament also featuring FC Porto and Internazionale.

## Ferguson explains Ruud decision

AFP, Amsterdam

Sir Alex Ferguson has admitted that Ruud van Nistelrooy's reaction to losing his first-team place at Manchester United was the major factor behind his decision to sell the Dutch striker to Real Madrid.

Van Nistelrooy, 30, ended his five-year stint at Old Trafford by sealing a 10.2-million-pound (£15m euro) transfer to Madrid last week, a move which has led to rare criticism of Ferguson from the United supporters.

Having scored 150 goals in just over 200 games for United, van Nistelrooy has proven to be a prolific goalscorer for the club since his 19-million-pound arrival from PSV Eindhoven in 2001.

However, having been dropped in favour of French striker Louis Saha for the League Cup Final against Wigan last February, Ferguson claimed that Van Nistelrooy's response to losing his place was not conducive to him remaining at United.

Ferguson said: "The difficult thing with footballers of today is the satisfaction that you have to give to them and part of that is picking the team."

"When Europe decided to bring in larger squads for players in their competitions, it became the most difficult thing for a manager because when you had to pick for a major game, there were always two or three players you were hesitant to tell that they were out."

"That was because they were great players, had been great players for you in the past and you

replace Van Nistelrooy by attracting a new striker to Old Trafford, the midfield area at the club has already been bolstered by the 18.6-million-pound arrival of England player Michael Carrick from Tottenham.

Carrick is set to make his United debut against FC Porto in the Amsterdam Tournament here on Friday evening and the 25-year-old

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## When politics disrupts play

AFP, Lisbon

EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso's visit to the Portuguese national team on the eve of its first World Cup match against Angola disrupted the squad's preparations for the game, the spokesman for the Portuguese football federation charges in a new book.

Afonso de Melo called the June 10 visit to the team's base during the tournament in Germany "ill-timed" in his recollections of Portugal's World Cup campaign which hit Portuguese bookstores on Thursday.

"It forced alterations to the security system and the schedule of the team. Especially since his handlers

demand that a huge number of reporters be present," he wrote according to excerpts published in daily newspaper 24Horas.

"For all of them, the inconvenience caused mattered little. The entire team stayed at the hotel, obliged to carry out the sacrifice of the kissing of the royal hand," he added.

Barroso, a former Portuguese Prime Minister and avid football fan, was in the stands during Portugal's 1-0 defeat over Angola in Cologne, Germany.

Portugal went on to lose to hosts Germany in the third-place World Cup play-off, their second-best performance in the history of the tournament.

## Donadoni set to experiment

INTERNET, undated

New Italy Coach Roberto Donadoni has conceded that many of the Azzurri's World Cup winners will not feature in the upcoming friendly against Croatia.

Donadoni will announce his squad for the August 16 match in Livorno on today, after having spent the past few weeks visiting the summer training locations of a host of clubs.

"My intention is to call only the players who are fit and ready," said the 42-year-old tactician on Friday.

"Many of the World Cup winners have only just returned from their holidays and are lacking the fitness necessary to play an entire game."

"I have already spoken to some of them to decide the best solution, but it's very probable that many will remain at home."

The Azzurri tactician reiterated that his doors will be open to all players and, considering the recent changes in Italian football, his selection will not be influenced by the category or the country where the candidates play in.

Donadoni also added that he has not yet spoken to Francesco Totti about his proposed retirement from international football.

"As I said at my official presentation, I will try to make him change his mind, but Francesco now needs to focus on his total recovery and on Roma's championship, there is time for the Nazionale," he concluded.

Donadoni's first competitive match is scheduled against Lithuania in a Euro 2008 qualifier against Lithuania in Naples.

He will then take his Giro Azzurro to Paris four days later to face France in a repeat of the World Cup Final.

## Man United admit Senna interest

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has confirmed speculation that he is interested in signing up Spanish international Marcos Senna from Villarreal.

"There is interest in Senna but there is interest in other players as well. Hopefully, something will happen next week," the United website quoted Ferguson as saying late Thursday at a press conference in Amsterdam, where the club are on a pre-season tour.

The 30-year-old midfielder has been linked with a 3.4-million-pound (£5 million euro) move to United.

Senna himself has said that he knew a transfer was possible and "I hope they sort things out as soon as possible so I know what my future will be."

Ferguson's major signing of the summer so far, England midfielder Michael Carrick, was expected to get his first taste of United action in the Amsterdam Tournament.

## Van der Sar sweating on new contract

AFP, Amsterdam

Edwin van der Sar has been told that he still has to earn a new contract at Manchester United, despite his impressive debut season at Old Trafford.

The 35-year-old, who earlier this week announced his intention to extend his international career with Holland until Euro 2008, was an ever-present fixture in the Premiership for United last term following his arrival from Fulham 12 months ago.

The former Ajax and Juventus goalkeeper signed a two-year deal when he arrived at United and no talks have yet taken place over an extension to that contract.

However, Old Trafford manager

Sir Alex Ferguson has made it clear that the Dutch keeper's chances of earning a new deal are high if he continues to perform as he did last season.

Ferguson said: "When we signed Edwin last year, the proviso on his future was that, if he does well, keeps his fitness and wants to carry on then we would look at extending his contract. That still applies."

"But there is no doubt that he brought a lot of experience to the team last season and that proved vital for us."

United are still attempting to sign West Bromwich Albion's Polish goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak as cover for the Dutch number one, in Amsterdam for the four-sided tournament involving United, Ajax, FC Porto and Inter Milan.

But van der Sar admits he is keen to prolong his stay with the Premiership giants.

He said: "There has been some suggestions that my contract runs until 2008, but my deal actually goes up to 2007."

"We have not spoken about it yet, but if I perform as I did last year, then I am hopeful and we will see what happens."

He added: "The reason that I have decided to carry on with Holland is that I am still enjoying my football very much and I feel fit."

"The World Cup was a big disappointment, but after spending two weeks on holiday in Spain and then getting back to training with United, I realised that I am doing what I love the most. That's why I am carrying on."

## Jakarta to host Asian Cup final

AFP, Hong Kong

Jakarta Friday won the right to host the final of next year's Asian Cup, beating off competition from Bangkok, Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur. Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia are joint-hosting Asia's premier football tournament, with Bangkok selected for the opening ceremony and opening game on July 7.

The two semifinals will take place in Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur with the final in the Indonesian capital on July 29.

"Our decision reflects the strengths and the wishes of the respective national associations," said AFC president Mohamed bin Hammam.

He said the decision on who

hosted what was based "on the criteria set by the AFC regarding the commitment of the national associations and their respective governments with regard to the competition requirements."

"This includes infrastructure, the addressing of security measures, the commitment to promote the event, and the protection of commercial rights."

The Asian Cup has never before been hosted by four countries and bin Hammam earlier this year admitted to AFP he was concerned about costs and logistical problems.

"It is proving very difficult for us. We have to have four organising committees, four media centres and there are also financial considerations," he said in January.

"It was my mistake. If we had a choice we definitely wouldn't do it again."

In announcing the decision Friday, he warned all four countries that they must be fully focused on the task ahead.

"Our team here at AFC are fully committed to delivering what we hope will be AFC's most successful competition to date," he said.

"But it is only with the host associations' dedication and commitment 24 hours a day, from today, that this will be achieved."

"We are putting great trust into these national associations. I am sure they will deliver."

Dali Taher, a member of the executive committee from the Indonesian Football Association in charge of preparing Indonesia's bid, hailed the decision and said the government was ready to host its matches properly.

"This is a significant turning

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Barcelona's top marksman Samuel Eto'o (R) shrugs off the challenge from Mario Mendez of Mexican club Tigres de UANL during a pre-season friendly in Monterrey on Thursday.



Real Madrid striker Raul (L) vies for the ball with Daniele Amerini of Reggina during a friendly played on a soggy pitch in Graz, Austria on Thursday.

## Reyes still Real-istic Juve appeal hearing on August 18

AFP, Rome

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain forward Jose Antonio Reyes has said he hopes to clear a move to Real Madrid before Arsenal play their Champions League third qualifying round match against Dinamo Zagreb on Tuesday.

"The manager (Arsene Wenger) hasn't said anything to me and I don't know if I am going to play or not. I hope I don't or that everything will be resolved before then," Reyes was quoted as telling sports daily Marca on Friday.

"Obviously, if I do, it will make a move to Real a lot more difficult. But I'll have to play, I will play."

The nine-times European champions have said they are only interested in signing players who would be available for all competitions. If Reyes played in Tuesday's first-leg

in Zagreb he would be ineligible for Real in Europe next season.

Real have made no secret of their interest in the player, who cost Arsenal a reported 20 million pounds (£37.45 million dollars) in January 2004, though sports director Predrag Mijatovic said on Wednesday he was not an immediate priority for them.

Despite denying reports a week ago that he wanted a move back to Spain, Reyes went on to add: "I know the people (at Arsenal) want me and the fans are with me but I haven't adapted to the life there."

"I miss Spain and I have a unique opportunity to return with what Real are offering. Everyone has to understand I can't let this chance slip away. Real Madrid are unique."

"I don't know what is happening but I am a little unsettled by all the rumours."

The Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) will hear Juventus' appeal against their punishment for match-fixing on August 18.

The Turin club were relegated from Serie A to the second division (Serie B) and given a 17-point penalty for the start of next season by the Italian football federation (FIGC) for their part in rigging matches in the 2004-05 season.

Juventus were also stripped of the league titles they won last season (2005/06) and the season before and barred from the Champions League.

CONI, the governing body of Italian sport, oversees the activities of all the various federations, including the FIGC.

The Serie A and Serie B campaigns will start on the weekend of September 9 and 10.