



Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham (L) prepares to leave the field after a training session as coach Fabio Capello (background) and defender Sergio Ramos looks on at Madrid on Thursday.

Beckham mulling his options

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

As many people embark on their resolutions for the forthcoming year, David Beckham is likely to be puzzling over one of the biggest decisions of his sporting career.

After all, January 1 marked the date on which the Real Madrid midfielder became free to negotiate with any club over his future as a player.

Over the next few weeks and months it will become clear if the 31-year-old has decided to see out his career with Real or opted instead to end his playing days elsewhere.

It will not be a straightforward decision for the former Manchester United idol.

Almost as soon as he joined Real in June 2003, Beckham said he wanted to end his career at the Bernabeu. Going anywhere else would be a step down, he said.

But four years of disappointment on the pitch and upheaval off it have taken the shine off Real's previously gleaming reputation.

Signed as the jewel in the crown of former president Florentino Perez's Galactico super team, rightly or wrongly Beckham has since become associated with an era of unprecedented failure at a

club that lives only for success.

Worse still, he has been demoted from the role of star performer in a glittering cast to that of bit-part actor.

Having been a fixture in the starting XI under the previous five coaches who have been in charge at Real, Beckham has become a peripheral figure under new boss Fabio Capello.

A younger player would have more incentive to sit it out and await his chance, but now in the twilight of his career, time is no longer on Beckham's side.

Barring an improbable change in Capello's plans, a decision to remain at Real would be an admission that Beckham is prepared to accept a role as a secondary figure reduced to making the occasional cameo appearance.

Real are keen to keep Beckham on the payroll for marketing and publicity reasons, but as a footballer he is no longer deemed indispensable.

So if he does decide to quit the Bernabeu what other doors remain open to the midfielder?

A return to the Premiership is one option.

Several teams have already voiced their interest, but the problem for Beckham is that his old club Manchester United is not one of them.

Riding high at the top of the table

and with the seemingly indestructible Alex Ferguson still in charge, United have no need for Beckham and a return of the prodigal son is out of the question.

Chelsea, the Premiership's other powerhouse, are apparently uninterested while it is hard to imagine Beckham being tempted by an offer to join say Bolton Wanderers or Newcastle United.

That leaves Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur as the most likely candidates.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is a Beckham fan, but the board would probably balk at Beckham's salary requirements while Spurs already have winger Aaron Lennon on their books.

If the realistic options in England are narrow, there is always the possibility of another continental adventure.

Moving to any other Spanish club is almost certainly out of the question, but Italy could offer a realistic alternative.

Inter Milan have signed up a succession of Real Madrid cast-offs in recent years and with the likely departure of Luis Figo there will be a vacant spot on the right side of midfield.

Wife Victoria may also find the catwalks of Italy's fashion capital an irresistible prospect, although if their Spanish experience is anything to go by the couple may not relish the prospect of grappling with another

new language and culture.

The Far and Middle East will have no problem matching Beckham's salary expectations, while his presence in Asia could be enough to see him recapture marketing supremacy from Ronaldinho.

But neither region is likely to provide the sort of sporting challenge that Beckham will be after in the final years of his career.

The remaining, and perhaps most attractive, option, then, is the United States.

The MLS's decision to end their salary cap has opened the door to big earners like Beckham, while LA Galaxy have already thrown their hat into the ring by stating their interest in the midfielder.

Greats such as Pele, George Best, Franz Beckenbauer, Johan Cruyff and Bobby Moore all ended their careers in America, but their presence did little to change the country's status as a footballing backwater.

Beckham may feel it is still too early for a move across the Atlantic, but becoming the first player to really crack the American market could provide just the sort of challenge to inspire him in the final years of his career.

A new beginning for Real?

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid have the option of using new signings Fernando Gago and Gonzalo Higuain on Sunday when they try to end a 15-year hoodoo at Deportivo Coruna in their first league game of 2007.

Fabio Capello's side ended last year with a humiliating 3-0 defeat at the hands of Recreativo Huelva and need to notch their first win at the Riazor since November 1991 to stay in touch with Sevilla and Barcelona.

Once again Real have been the biggest spenders in the transfer market, splashing out close to 40 million euros (52.69 million dollars) on central midfielder Gago, teenage striker Higuain and Brazilian left

back Marcelo.

Although the Argentine pair have only taken part in a handful of training sessions since their arrival, Capello could give them a run out in an attempt to revitalise his third-placed team.

With Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy doubtful due to a thigh problem, Higuain could feature up front while Gago may partner Emerson or Mahamadou Diarra in the centre of midfield.

Depor, in a transition phase having sold several experienced players over the past two seasons, are having a difficult time and lie four points above the relegation zone in 15th place.

They have not won in nine games, conceding 10 goals and scoring none in their last three outings.

Despite Depor's poor form, Real also know they must improve on their last display.

"We finished the year very badly and the match against Recreativo was a disaster," said centre back Fabio Cannavaro earlier this week.

"The good thing about football is that on Sunday we'll have another chance to get it right and play well."

Sevilla, three points clear at the top of the table, face a tricky trip to fifth-placed Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

The leaders have added Alexander Kerzhakov to their squad but the Russian striker will find it tough to make the first team given the outstanding form of Frederic Kanoute this season.

The Mail international leads the scoring charts with 14 goals and has found the net in each of the last four games.

Second-placed Barcelona, three points behind Sevilla with a game in hand, will be without suspended Ronaldinho and Deco plus injured defenders Gianluca Zambrotta and

Lilian Thuram at Bernd Schuster's Getafe on Sunday.

Valencia look for their fourth win on the trot at an out-of-sorts Villarreal on Sunday, the same day as Real Betis host Celta Vigo in Luis Fernandez's first game as coach.

FIXTURES

Saturday (1600 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Atletico Madrid v Gimnastic Tarragona (1900), Real Sociedad v Osasuna (1900), Real Zaragoza v Sevilla (2100)
Sunday
Real Betis v Celta Vigo, Espanyol v Recreativo Huelva, Getafe v Barcelona, Levante v Racing Santander, Real Mallorca v Athletic Bilbao, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Madrid (1800), Villarreal v Valencia (2000)

Ronaldo's latest capture

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Real Madrid's Brazilian football superstar Ronaldo got more than he bargained for when he went to see a dentist in Rio de Janeiro.

The former three-time world player of the year came out with whiter nashers and a new girlfriend.

El Gordo (fatty) as he is affectionately known in Spain, having once been known as El Fenomeno (the phenomenon), is seeing dentist Erika Abreu, according to Brazilian paper O Globo.

Social commentator Ancelmo Gois claims that after a few sessions in the dentist's chair to whiten his famously goofy teeth, Ronaldo has invited Abreu to spend Christmas with him in Rio.

The couple flew first class to SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

No more excuses: Magath

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich coach Felix Magath has told his players they can have no more excuses after returning to training on Friday following the German winter break.

Bayern have had a poor start to the season by their double-winning standards of the previous two seasons.

They are third, three points off leaders Werder Bremen and second-placed Schalke 04, but Magath says post-World Cup tiredness is no longer an acceptable excuse.

"The World Cup is completely behind us, we have no more excuses," said Magath before heading out to Dubai, where Bayern will be on a training camp until January 14.

"We were not able to prepare together for the first half of the season and that showed in our performances since August: we SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Hewitt's coach quits

AFP, Adelaide

Lleyton Hewitt's coach Roger Rasheed on Friday announced he had quit his role with Australia's former world number one.

In a statement, Rasheed said he and Hewitt could no longer work together.

Rasheed has been Hewitt's coach since 2003, and his decision to quit comes little over a week before the start of the Australian Open, a tournament Hewitt has never won.

The decision comes a day after Hewitt went down to unheralded SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Figo signs for Al Ittihad

AFP, Manama

Portugal World Cup star Luis Figo has signed a one-year contract to play for Saudi Arabian side Al Ittihad next season, club chairman Mansour al Balwi told AFP on Friday.

"We have signed a deal for one year from July 1, 2007," he said.

No further details of the contract were available, but al Balwi said it was "one of the biggest deals ever in the Middle East."

"Luis Figo has lots of experience and he will be a great asset for the club," al Balwi said.

Al Ittihad have been chasing the 34-year-old Inter Milan midfielder for several weeks and had previously claimed that he had signed a one-year contract worth 4.5 million euros (5.9 million dollars) and SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Football

REUTERS, Macclesfield

Former England international Paul Ince is dreaming of maintaining his excellent start as manager of Macclesfield Town by knocking Premier League champions Chelsea out of the FA Cup on Saturday.

Ince, who used to patrol the midfield for Manchester United, has revitalised the fourth division club since taking on his first managerial job in October.

From being hopelessly adrift at the bottom of the table and without a win in 15 matches, he has inspired Macclesfield to eight victories in 14 games including two in the FA Cup to take the team into the third round for only the sixth time in their history.

"In a two-horse race you've always got a chance," Ince told reporters on Thursday. "Looking at the way Chelsea have performed in the last few weeks and the way we have a bit of form, you don't know."

"We know all the problems Chelsea have got and that's what gives us a chance."

Injury-hit Chelsea have con-

ceded eight goals in their last four league games.

"The fact they have only got one central defender gives us a chance," said Ince. "We are going there with a chance and if you go there with a chance, who knows what can happen?"

"Chelsea have drawn their last three games. We have won three so there is that element of pressure on Chelsea to come out and put us to sleep early doors."

Ince, 39, looks likely to resist the temptation to select himself after registering as a player when the January transfer window opened.

"The lads deserve, for what they've achieved and what they've done for me and the staff, to be out there and get their chance to play in a world-class stadium," he said.

Ince, who also had spells with Liverpool, Inter Milan, Middlesbrough, West Ham United and Wolverhampton Wanderers, began the season as a player with Swindon Town.

Macclesfield won promotion to the Football League in 1997, play in front of average crowds of around 2,000 and pay their players less in a year than most Chelsea players earn in a week.



Swiss star Martina Hingis waits to return serve from Italian opponent Tathiana Garbin during the Mondial Australian Women's Hardcourts tennis semifinal match at the Gold Coast on Friday.

Hingis through to final

Tennis

AFP, Gold Coast

Top seed Martina Hingis got an armchair ride into the final of the Australian Women's Hardcourt tennis championships here Friday when her opponent, Tathiana Garbin, retired due to illness.

Hingis was trailing 3-4 in their semi-final when Garbin called for a trainer after she experienced breathing difficulties.

The Italian had been holding her own against the former world number one when she began to feel the effects of a viral illness she had been suffering this week.

After taking an injury break, Garbin decided she could not continue and handed the match to Hingis, who will now play Russian second seed Dinara Safina in the final.

"That's quite unusual because it's the first time in my life I've been down and my opponent has

defaulted," Hingis said.

Hingis started the match slowly, losing her first two service games and trailing 1-3 early in the set.

But she said once she started to find some form she was able to move Garbin around the court, and that was when the Italian began to have difficulties.

"I could see she started to struggle a little bit and she was leaning over the banner," Hingis said.

"She definitely surprised me in the beginning and I had to earn my points."

Hingis said she wasn't disappointed she was missing out on valuable match practice ahead of the Australian Open after a series of easy wins this week.

"I played very well in the first couple of matches," she said. "Maybe sometimes you have to go into matches with the plan to stay awake."

"When you go into matches, you can't take them lightly. But now I've had a couple of easier

days and I'll definitely be ready for the final."

The unseeded Garbin -- who contracted the viral infection on Monday -- has now lost all five encounters she has had with Hingis.

"This week I played my best tennis but I was sick for days," Garbin said.

"I tried to keep going even though I was sick. It was tough, but I did it anyway."

The second semi-final was a brutal slugfest between two youngsters fighting for every point.

Leading 5-2 in the second set and serving for the match, 19-year-old fifth seed Shahar Peer crumbled under pressure to allow Safina to force a tiebreak which the Russian blitzed 7-1.

A short rain delay appeared to aid Safina even further and the 20-year-old world number 11 went on to storm through the deciding set 6-1 against a shellshocked Peer and claim the match in two hours, 15 minutes.



Inter Milan midfielder Luis Figo (L) poses with Mansour al-Balwi, the chairman of Al-Ittihad club, after signing a one-year contract with the Saudi club in Manama on Friday.