

Galacticos near extinction?



Football

AFP, Madrid

Crisis club Real Madrid are set to cut their losses during the transfer window and ditch their two remaining galacticos Ronaldo and David Beckham, according to Spanish newspaper AS on Tuesday.

Real began 2007 as they finished 2006 - with a defeat - and already the knives are out for two of the Bernabeu's biggest, and best-paid, stars.

Coach Fabio Capello met with sporting director Pedrag Mijatovic and president Ramon Calderon on Monday and AS claims he demanded the two stars be sold during the January transfer window.

While Beckham, whose contract runs out at the end of the season, continues to stall over signing an extension, Ronaldo's is a case of time

having finally caught up with the three-times world player of the year.

"If you can, sell him during the transfer window," Capello told his bosses, according to AS. "In these conditions, he's not part of my plans."

Ronaldo's career has hit the skids over the past two seasons.

Once regarded as the most dangerous and prolific striker in world football, he is now much derided for his expanded waistline and reduced influence on the pitch.

Last season he was frequently jeered by Real's fans and before a Champions League match against Arsenal he made a public plea for patience, while also suggesting he would leave in the close season.

But the new season brought a new coach and Capello decided to give him one last chance, only now his patience has worn thin.

French newspaper L'Equipe has also claimed that Ronaldo, who has

played in just seven league games this season, more than half of those as a substitute, and scored a solitary goal, is a bad influence on other players, notably young Brazilians Robinho and Marcelo.

Rumours abound that Ronaldo leads his impressionable teammates on inappropriate nights out, while he often turns up to train, according to Capello, "in an unacceptable condition for a professional footballer at Real Madrid."

But to blame Ronaldo for Real's malaise this season would be unfair. In all competitions he has taken to the field just 13 times, including six times as a substitute.

His return of four goals and no assists is not what the Bernabeu has come to expect of the once star striker, but given he missed the start of the season with injury and has started only seven of Real's 24 matches in league, cup and Champions League, he cannot be

solely blamed for their demise.

Yet Ronaldo's performance in Real's recent slump, which included three defeats in their last four league matches, was not worth his reported 10 million euros a year salary.

A 3-0 defeat at home to newly-promoted Recreativo Huelva saw Ronaldo play 67 minutes and manage only one shot on goal - which missed the target.

He got only 37 minutes as a substitute at Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday, a team that had not won in 10 league games, and he managed just two shots this time.

The Brazilian superstar's status at the club has greatly changed.

His former president Florentino Perez, whose galacticos policy at the club initially yielded such great success, once said of him: "I would sooner sell the Santiago Bernabeu than let Ronaldo leave."

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PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski (L) tumbles under the strong challenge of Benfica defender Anderson Luisao during their match at the Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashed al-Maktum Cup tournament in Dubai on Monday.

Simulation worries FIFA



Football

AP, Zurich

FIFA criticised players at the World Cup for the "deplorable habit" of faking injuries, disruptions that the governing body said marred last summer's tournament.

In its official report on the 2006 World Cup, FIFA also praised German organizers for a staging a trouble-free event, which Italy won by beating France on a penalty-kick shootout in the final.

However, Zinedine Zidane's ejection for head-butting Italy defender Marco Materazzi was just a footnote, even though it was perhaps the most memorable moment of the entire tournament.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter, in a foreword to the report, described the

organization of the World Cup as "faultless" and the fan behaviour "a complete success." FIFA, however, clearly was displeased by the trend of players falling to field as if injured.

"At this World Cup, the deplorable habit that involves players staying down for no apparent reason after minor collisions, thus causing frequent breaks in play, was increasingly in evidence," said the report of the FIFA Technical Committee.

"The ensuing attacks by the team in possession were accompanied by wildly gesticulating coaches and assistants on the touchline, protests from the defending team, who often simply stayed where they were, and a reaction from the crowd until such time as the referee stopped the game."

When players go down injured, the team in possession traditionally puts the ball out of play. From the restart, the ball is then passed back

to the team which deliberately put the ball out.

Now, FIFA warns that coaches and players are unfairly taking advantage.

"In some cases, the player lying on the ground was treated for quite a while before being led off the pitch and was often ready to come back on before the game had been restarted," the World Cup report said. "When play eventually continued, the ball was played back to the team who had been in possession ... but in a place that put them at a clear disadvantage."

The report said the interruptions destroyed the flow of the game.

"What unquestionably began as a gesture of fair play is developing into a method of disrupting the other team's play," it said. "It is time to put a stop to this abuse of fair play."

Platini slams Johansson

AFP, Paris

French legend Michel Platini has blasted UEFA chief Lennart Johansson for opposing his bid to take over the presidency of European football's governing body.

The 51-year-old former St Etienne and Juventus midfielder has been targetting the top UEFA job for the last few years and initially it was thought he would go up against German giant Franz Beckenbauer.

But once it was clear that Beckenbauer would not be a candidate, sitting president Johansson announced that at 77-years-old he would seek re-election at the January 26 vote in Dusseldorf.

Platini said Johansson's decision had shocked him.

"I just don't understand why he has no confidence in me," he said.

"He told everyone that he was standing down, then he started looking around to find someone to beat me and then he decided to stand again because he couldn't find anyone."

"Everything was done to clear the way for Franz Beckenbauer. They scheduled the congress in Dusseldorf for him. In some ways he was taken as a hostage to the election process."

"But I just don't understand why he (Johansson) decided to stand again. It's very courageous of him, but the people that encouraged him to do so are not so courageous."

The vote later this month in Dusseldorf will involve all 52 national football associations that are members of the European Football Union, with each member having one vote.

Platini said that so far very few members had indicated which way they would vote, which he said would be a worry for Johansson who has been head of UEFA for 17 years

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Italy president hails champs

AFP, Rome

Italy president Giorgio Napolitano on Monday saluted the World Cup-winning squad for restoring some pride in the nation's most popular sport after it had been tarnished by the 'Calciopoli' match-fixing scandal.

Napolitano paid tribute to the Azzurri as he awarded each player the 'Cavaliere Ufficiale, one of the country's highest public service decorations.

"Our victory shed some light on our football after it had fallen into darkness," he said.

The Cavaliere Ufficiale, or Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, was established in 1951 and is given to individuals for distinguished services for their country.

Italy claimed the World Cup for a fourth time by beating France 5-3 on penalties last July after the Berlin final had ended in a 1-1 draw.

Roma to sign Wilhelmsson

AFP, Rome

Roma are close to signing Swedish international Christian Wilhelmsson from French club Nantes, the Serie A title-chasers said.

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti said the 27-year-old midfielder had agreed terms and was undergoing a medical.

Wilhelmsson will be Roma's second capture in the January transfer window following the loan signing of striker Francesco Tavano from Spanish club Valencia.

Roma are currently second in Serie A, seven points behind leaders Inter Milan.

The Italian Serie A commences on next Saturday after the midseason break.



Football

INTERNET, undated

German giants Bayern Munich lost 4-3 on penalties to Benfica while Italian side Lazio prevailed 3-1 against French rivals Marseille in the Dubai Cup semifinals on Monday.

In their first preparation match ahead of the second half of the season, the German champions were held to a 0-0 draw in normal time against the Portuguese side, before Marcello Moretto saved spot-kicks from Claudio Pizarro and Mark van Bommel.

Bayern goalkeeper Oliver Kahn saved one penalty - from Beto - but it is the Portuguese side who will now go on to meet Lazio in the final of the tournament, with the winner set to pick up prize money of one million dollars.

The game opened cautiously

with chances at a premium in a first half that Bayern just shaded against the Lisbon side. Dutch midfielder Mark van Bommel was unlucky to see a 20-yard thunderbolt cannon off the bar on seven minutes, but Benfica keeper Moretto was rarely troubled as efforts by Roque Santa Cruz (25, 28) and Ali Karimi (42) drifted wide of the target.

Kahn was also a spectator for much of the half, although the Munich shot-stopper was almost beaten in stoppage time after Nunu Gomes released Simao for a clear run on goal, only for the Portugal star to slide his shot wide of the upright.

There was a host of substitutions in the second half which affected the tempo of play and the fact that the players only resumed training a couple of days ago became increasingly apparent as passes went astray from heavy legs.

The crowd was thus treated to a

second half short on highlights until a frantic closing phase as both sides had chances prompted by fading concentration in defence. However, the score remained goalless and the game went to penalties, where van Bommel and Pizarro proved unable to convert handing Benfica a final ticket.

In the day's other semifinal Lazio defeated former European champions Marseille.

The Italian outfit comfortably beat their French opponents 3-1 with goals from Stefano Mauri, Stephen Makinwa and a Pasquale Foggia penalty. Midfielder Samir Nasri scored for the Ligue 1 side.

Boss Delio Rossi used this match to test out a few experiments given the likely January departure of Massimo Oddo to Milan.

Swiss international Valon Behrami, normally a midfielder, was fielded in the right-back role during the encounter.

Bayern gain Ribery first option



Football

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich will have first option on Marseille midfielder Franck Ribery as and when he becomes available for transfer, according to general manager Uli Hoeness.

Both clubs are currently residing in the same Dubai hotel during the Mohammad bin Rashid International Football Championship, allowing Bayern their closest look at the France international.

With Real Madrid reportedly ready to make a move this winter, the German champions could face another head-to-head battle with the Spanish La Liga giants for his signature.

Bayern lost out to Real in the summer when Ruud van Nistelrooy opted to move to Spain instead of Germany.

But they are in pole position for the services of Ribery, with Hoeness saying: "(Marseille president Papaj) Diouf has promised me that he will speak to us before a decision is taken."

"We have not yet spoken to the player because that is not permitted."

"That will only happen when Marseille give us the signal that they are ready to talk and when we feel that we want to do so."

Hoeness admitted that Ribery is not their current transfer priority

either. He said: "He is a player who interests us, but he is not number one or two on the list."

"If Sebastian (Deisler) returns in the form he was promising before Christmas, then it becomes less important to sign Franck Ribery."



FRANCK RIBERY

Smith to take on Rangers job

AFP, Glasgow

Scotland manager Walter Smith was denied Monday the chance to coach Rangers after the Scottish Football Association (SFA) rejected his request to leave his contract with the national side.

But despite that refusal Smith is still expected to succeed Paul Le Guen, BBC Scotland suggested.

According to the report at the end of Monday's meeting Smith is understood to have said his good-byes to staff at the SFA where he is under contract until 2008.

The BBC suggests he will take over the helm of the troubled Scottish giants once compensation has been agreed.

Scotland striker coach Ally McCoist is expected to move with him.

The SFA issued a statement declaring: "Following contact from Rangers F.C., the SFA held a meeting this (Monday) morning with Walter Smith."

"At this meeting, Walter Smith asked to be relieved of his contract as Scotland's national team manager. This request was refused."

"Rangers F.C. have been advised accordingly."

It is understood the SFA's refusal

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Luque's PSV escape route

INTERNET, undated

Dutch champions PSV Eindhoven are hoping to end Albert Luque's Newcastle nightmare.

The Spain international striker has had a disastrous spell on Tyneside since joining the Toon for £5million from Deportivo La Coruna in the summer of 2005.

Injuries and loss of form have meant he's failed to produce anything like the form that first caught the attention of the Magpies.

But now, according to The Newcastle Chronicle, Luque could have an escape route and a chance to play in the Champions League.

The paper claims runaway Dutch Eredivisie leaders PSV have told Newcastle that they are prepared to take the 28-year-old striker on loan for the next 18 months, and a decision will be made in the next few days.

The main sticking point could be Luque's current £40,000-per-week wages.

A source in Holland told the paper: "PSV's interest in Luque has really come out of the blue, but Ronald Koeman is convinced he can get the best out of him."

"PSV have informed United of their interest and the player is also aware of the situation. Now the ball is very much in Newcastle's court."



PHOTO: AFP

Marseilles forward Toiflou Maoulida (R) helps Lazio midfielder Valon Behrami to his feet during their clash at the Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashed al-Maktum Cup tournament in Dubai on Monday.

Chelsea deny Mourinho rumours



Football

AFP, London

Chelsea have insisted they will not be distracted from Wednesday's League Cup semifinal first leg away to Wycombe by talk that manager Jose Mourinho is set to quit Stamford Bridge at the end of the season.

The English champions were adamant that talk of falling-out involving the club's billionaire Russian owner Roman Abramovich, chief executive Peter Kenyon and Mourinho was "little-tattle".

And Kenyon also told Monday's London Evening Standard: "You've got to look where we are. We're second in the league and behind by six points with arguably the toughest part of the season still to come."

"We qualified top of the group in the Champions League which, again, was arguably one of the toughest groups. We're in the semifinal of the Carling (League) Cup and through to the fourth round of the FA Cup."

"Would you rather be six points clear. Of course," added Kenyon, whose former club, Manchester United, currently top the table.

"But this is not the end of the season and this is not doom and gloom. I think we're in a very good position with a very strong squad."

Chelsea have been linked with a post-season move for Russia national Guus Hiddink, who already knows Abramovich. But Russian officials were quick to point out Monday that the Dutchman's contract runs until 2008.

However, that is unlikely to stop

the speculation surrounding Mourinho. The longest stint the Portuguese has served as a manager was the two-and-a-half years he spent in charge of Porto, the club which he left for Chelsea.

Misfiring striker Andriy Shevchenko is set to start against League Two Wycombe.

Although Chelsea beat Macclesfield 6-1 in the third round of the FA Cup, 30 million pounds Ukraine international Shevchenko failed to score against the second worst side in all four senior English divisions.

"I think he tried hard against Macclesfield and that's a step," said a cautious Mourinho. "For a striker to be in a team that wins 6-1 and not score one of them is frustrating, but he fought hard."

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