

Not all well at S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

South African Premier Soccer League (PSL) chief Trevor Phillips has slammed the disruption caused to local league matches as a result of the rush to upgrade stadia ahead of the 2010 World Cup.

"Everybody is rushing to upgrade stadia, forgetting that we have a league to run. If dates for these renovations had been given to us earlier then we would not have this crisis," PSL chief executive Phillips complained.

The furore erupted after stadia previously used as venues for professional soccer matches were bulldozed, and are now being renovated as preparations for the world event go into full swing.

This has forced the sixteen PSL teams to find alternative venues far from their local bases, or share the few available pitches.

"Stadium unavailability experienced in the first round of the league, is expected to continue," said Phillips.

"We need greater coordination of activities between the local municipalities, the League and other vital stakeholders."

In December last year, Soccer City stadium in Soweto, where the opening and closing matches of the World Cup will take place, was closed and home team Kaizer Chiefs had to find an alternative venue.

They are expected to share this venue with two more soccer teams, and a local rugby team in Pretoria.

Ten stadia have been chosen as host venues for 2010 World Cup matches.

Cahill boosts Everton

AFP, Liverpool

Influential Australian midfielder Tim Cahill is expected to return to the Everton team to face Reading in the Premiership at Goodison Park on Sunday.

David Moyes' side have suffered during his absence, winning only four of 11 games and going out of the FA Cup following their third-round defeat to Blackburn last weekend.

Assistant boss Alan Irvine cannot wait to have him back in the fold, after a week of full training.

"When key players are out, it makes a huge difference to results and performances," said Irvine.

"Tim coming back will be a massive boost. It will almost be like Chelsea getting (John) Terry and (Petr) Cech back."

Cahill has been sidelined since November 11 when he picked up a knee injury in the match against Aston Villa.

Meanwhile, Reading intend to recruit only British players to the Madejski Stadium while the current transfer window remains open.

The Royals already have a cosmopolitan squad with internationals from USA, South Korea, Iceland and Nigeria battling for places with teammates from England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

But director of football Nick Hammond confirmed: "It is almost guaranteed there will be no signings from abroad. There's a time of adjustment when players come in from overseas."

"If you sign a player now and want them to affect the first team then they need to be up and running. So it's more likely to be players from over here."

Larsson pledges more work rate

AFP, Manchester

Veteran Swedish star Henrik Larsson is determined to build on his goal-scoring debut for Manchester United when he faces Aston Villa for the second time in a week at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Larsson was on target in the 2-1 FA Cup win against Villa last week and comes up against Martin O'Neill's struggling side again in the Premiership where United look to maintain their stranglehold on top of the table.

"I was happy with my fitness and sharpness but I can't get carried away because this was just one game," said Larsson who is on a 10-week loan from Swedish side Helsingborgs.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer and I know I need to keep working hard and improving."

Martin O'Neill believes Gavin McCann is making the same kind of impact for Aston Villa as Neil Lennon did under his command at Leicester and Celtic.

Lennon was part of the midfield triumvirate at Leicester also consisting of Robbie Savage and Muzzy Izzet, which was the bedrock of the Foxes success under O'Neill and he was equally important after moving to Parkhead.

McCann is a similar sort of player and his know-how and experience has been crucial in a young team although O'Neill insists there is more to his game than just breaking up play.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's new recruit Gonzalo Higuain (L) shields the ball from Real Betis midfielder Capi during their King's Cup match at the Manuel Ruiz de Lopera Stadium in Seville on Thursday.

Real aim to end rot

AFP, Madrid



David Beckham's long goodbye to Real Madrid begins on Sunday with the former England skipper likely to be given a rare start as the Spanish giants seek to reignite their season.

Beckham, who will leave Spain to play for Los Angeles Galaxy in the United States at the end of the season, could feature in coach Fabio Capello's plans as injuries and suspensions mount at Real who have lost three of their last four league games.

Despite the dismal run, Real are still third but are now five points behind leaders Sevilla and will be looking to recover their poise by beating Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Barca lie second to Sevilla, two points behind the surprise league leaders who last won La Liga in 1946, but the Catalans have a game in hand.

"We have to pick up three points," said Barca's midfielder Edmilson, well aware that Barca have drawn three of their last four games.

"We may have beaten them twice in the (pre-season) Spanish Super Cup but in front of their home fans we'll be climbing a steeper slope."

The match brings together Barcelona captain Carles Puyol and

Espanyol's Ivan De La Pena, his fellow Spanish international and close friend from the days when they were together in the Barca youth academy.

"Our friendship is forgotten as soon as we are on the pitch. Each one of us is determined to win and for his team. But what happens on the pitch, stays on the pitch and we are friends again straight away afterwards," explained Puyol.

De La Pena said: "I think Carles is one of the best central defenders in the world, for his concentration, aggression, and the way he takes control of the game."

Barcelona could well be without their Portuguese international winger Deco, who picked up a thigh injury in training on Wednesday while Espanyol will be missing their suspended midfielder Pablo Zabaleta.

FIXTURES

(Kick-off times in GMT)

Saturday

Valencia v Levante (1900), Espanyol v Barcelona (2100)

Sunday

Athletic Bilbao v Villarreal (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Getafe (1600), Osasuna v Real Betis (1600), Racing Santander v Real Sociedad (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Deportivo La Coruna (1600), Sevilla v Real Mallorca (1600), Celta Vigo v Atletico Madrid (1800), Real Madrid v Real Zaragoza (2000)

Much to do for Becks



AFP, Los Angeles

English superstar David Beckham will leave Real Madrid hoping to achieve a feat that eluded even the legendary Pele - stoking football fever in the United States.

Beckham signed a five-year deal worth a reported 248 million dollars to play for the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League Soccer. The 31-year-old midfielder will leave the Spanish giants after his contract expires on June 30.

While Beckham has lost his place in the Real starting lineup, his public image and lucrative sponsorship deals give him the glamour and power to make US audiences take notice of a sport largely ignored in favor of baseball, basketball and American football.

"David Beckham will have a greater impact on soccer in America than any athlete has ever had on a sport globally," said Timothy Leiweke, president of the ownership group that operates the Galaxy.

"He is truly the only individual that can build the bridge between soccer in America and the rest of the world."

The former Manchester United star and England captain joined Real in 2003, combining with Ronaldo, Zinedine Zidane, Roberto Carlos and Luis Figo in a lineup that failed to win a major trophy despite its nickname of "galacticos".

Not since Pele stepped onto the field for the New York Cosmos in 1975 has American soccer seen anything approaching the scope of Beckham's signing.

The Brazilian wizard became the main man of a global all-star

team that included German master Franz Beckenbauer and Italy's Giorgio Chinaglia, yesteryear's Cosmos being the spiritual ancestors of today's galacticos.

George Best, Gordon Banks, Rodney Marsh, Carlos Alberto and Eusebio were among the stars who found late-career gold on American teams when crowds of 70,000 watched the Cosmos.

But once Pele retired, the party ended and the Cosmos and the entire North American Soccer League folded soon after, a victim of over-expansion and little interest in the game beyond the superstar squad.

That lesson has helped keep Major League Soccer grounded in salary limits and low-priced talent since its 1996 debut, allowing the league to grow and build solid support but with fan interest levels far below other US sports.

"David Beckham is a global sports icon who will transcend the sport of soccer in America," MLS commissioner Don Garber said.

"His decision to continue his storied career in Major League Soccer is testament to the fact that America is rapidly becoming a true Soccer Nation."

MLS officials made a rule change after last season allowing clubs to bypass the salary cap for one player, opening the door to a big-money Beckham signing - the first under the MLS' new designated player rule.

It could unlock the floodgates for other global talent, especially big names in their waning years, and create the excitement and financial support needed to make the "real" football flourish.

"The addition of David Beckham represents another significant step forward for the MLS," Garber said. "David's

Mares left Sparta Prague in 2002 for Zenit.

World Cup construction angers South African soccer league

KING'S CUP Betis hold Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's problems continued when they failed to break down a relegation-threatened Real Betis and had to settle for a 0-0 draw in a dull Spanish Cup last 16 first leg match on Thursday.

Spanish sports daily Marca held an internet poll during the course of the match and more than 65 per cent of respondents said that Real would not miss David Beckham when he leaves Los Angeles Galaxy in the summer.

However, his former fans might be thinking again after Real's poor showing for which the former England captain was dropped by coach Fabio Capello.

"I am only going to talk about this game and that is another matter," said Capello when the subject of Beckham's departure was raised.

"I liked the spirit of our team tonight. I'm happy," added Capello.

"A 0-0 draw is definitely not a bad result on a difficult pitch. They had the best of the first half, when they had two good chances, but I think we were better in the second."

On balance, the home side had the best chances and Betis's Brazilian winger Wagner had two excellent opportunities to open the scoring in the first half.

Madrid had to rely on their two new Argentine acquisitions for their best attempts to break the deadlock.

Gonzalo Higuain nearly marked his Real debut with a goal but his right foot effort midway through the first half brought an outstanding save from goalkeeper Pedro Contreras, himself a former Madrid player.

"He did well. People who come here from other continents usually need a bit of time to adapt to European football," said Capello.

Fernando Gago sent a shot from the edge of the area whistling over the bar after 73 minutes but, like everyone else, the midfielder ended the night without a goal to his name.

Real's injury woes among their defenders also increased when Brazilian left back Roberto Carlos limped off after just 11 minutes.

Club medical officials later said that they feared he could be out for up to a month with a torn right calf muscle.

Real have now only won one of their last six matches in all competitions.

The second leg will be on January 18 at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

Oddo not for sale

INTERNET, undated

Lazio chief Claudio Lotito has continued to maintain that Milan target Massimo Oddo is not for sale.

The defender is a confirmed target for the Rossoneri even if Vice-President Adriano Galliani confessed on Tuesday that the two parties were far from reaching an agreement.

"Lazio have never put Oddo on sale, therefore it is useless to talk about figures," said the capital chief before entering the Lega Calcio offices in Milan on Friday.

"His contract expires in 2008 and that is it. Of course, if he wanted to leave, and this is an option from what I read, we would not block him. We would only need the right offer to let him go."

The 30-year-old started his career in Milan's youth team and he has reiterated that he would be happy to join the Rossoneri again.

"Oddo might want to leave, but I would also like to be the President of the Republic. Things aren't always that easy," noted Lotito.

"We do not need the money, so I don't want to talk about that aspect. The problem is that we would need to replace him from a technical point of view. We need everyone's will to solve this issue."

Galliani confirmed that the two clubs have not reached an agreement over a fee, although new meetings are scheduled for next week.

"We spoke this morning, but there is still a gap between what we are offering and Lazio's request," said the official on the Gazzetta dello Sport's website.

"We will meet next week to discuss it again. What will happen? I don't know - I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic."

"Let's say that our chances of signing Oddo are 50-50. If he doesn't arrive then we will not make any other moves on the market," ended Galliani.

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Milan see semi spot



INTERNET, undated

Milan have one foot in the semifinals of the Italian Cup after a 2-0 win over Arezzo at the San Siro.

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