

Coach opposes Rocha move

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica coach Fernando Santos said Friday he wants defender Ricardo Rocha, who has reportedly sparked interest from English Premiership club Tottenham, to stay put at the Lisbon-based club.

"Obviously a player who regularly starts for Benfica is not considered to be available for a transfer," he told a news conference when asked about the reports linking Rocha to a move to Tottenham.

"But these issues are decided by the club's management, not by the coach. My job is to prepare the team technically."

Benfica's international striker Nuno Gomes also weighed in, telling reporters it would be better for the club if Rocha stayed.

"If he leaves that is life for a footballer but if he stays it is Benfica who wins," he said.

Earlier this week Portuguese media reported that Tottenham have offered Benfica five million euros (6.5 million US dollars) for Rocha, who has said he would welcome a move to the English Premiership.

Benfica issued a statement denying it was holding talks with Tottenham or any other club regarding the 28-year-old player while a Tottenham spokesman refused to confirm or deny the press reports.

Rocha joined Benfica in the summer of 2002 after spending time at Portuguese sides FC Famalicao and SC Braga. He is under contract with the club until 2010.

The player has scored three goals in 12 appearances for Benfica this season and also has three Portuguese caps.

Real threatened with sanctions

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish football authorities on Friday fined Real Madrid and threatened the club with a stadium ban after fans threw objects onto the pitch as the club crashed out Thursday to Real Betis in the Spanish Cup. Marks daily reported on its website.

The Cup competition authority of the Spanish Football Federation elected to hand down an unspecified fine and added it was mulling the possibility of an additional stadium ban after a bottle thrown onto the pitch hit a linesman's arm, the report indicated.

A mobile telephone was also hurled onto the pitch at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium and referee Enrique Mejuto Gonzalez had to stop play briefly before Betis emerged with a 1-1 second leg draw which took them through to the last eight on the away goals rule.

Fans had been outraged that Real defender Ivan Helgeira's late header, which found the back of the net, had been ruled out through offside.

USA, Ecuador book March friendly

AFP, Chicago

Ecuador, a loser only once in nine matches against the United States, will play the Americans in an international football friendly on March 25 at Tampa, Florida, the US Soccer Federation said Friday.

The match comes during a FIFA window allowing top European players to be available for the match, allowing US interim coach Bob Bradley to assemble an elite side in a key tuneup for June's Copa America and Gold Cup tournaments.

"With the ability to bring together our full group of players from Europe and MLS, the match against Ecuador will provide an excellent opportunity to prepare for the upcoming tournaments," Bradley said.

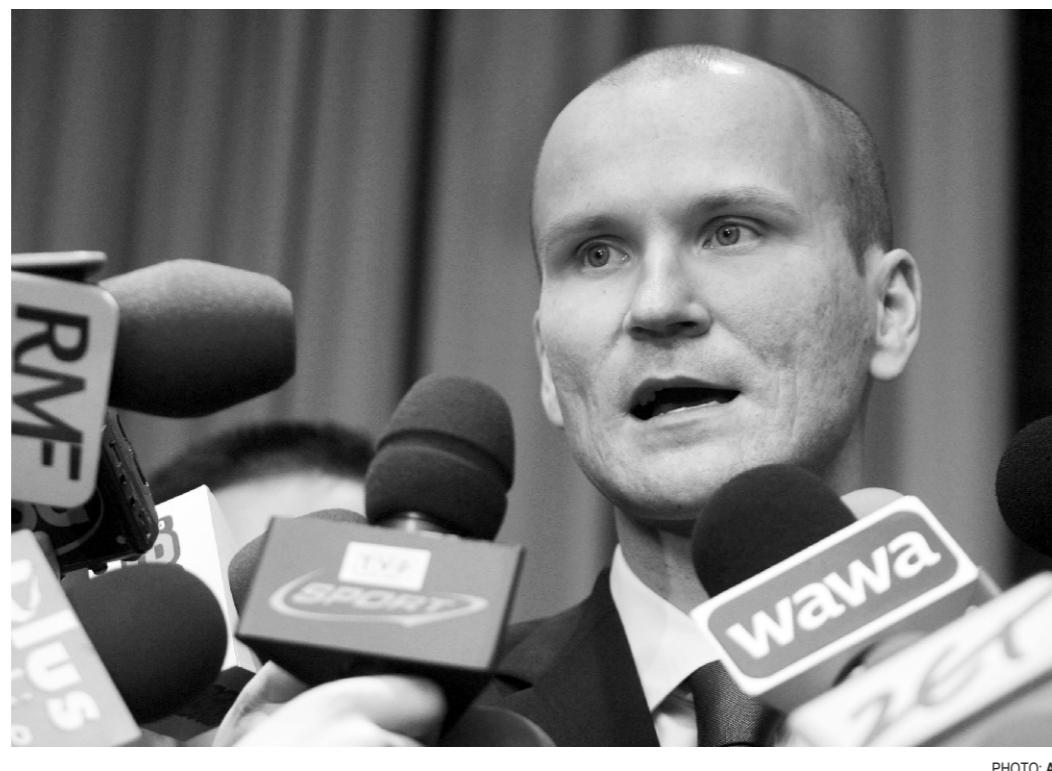
Ecuador, which advanced to the second round at last year's World Cup before losing to England, lost to the US men for the first time in their most recent meeting, a 1-0 away defeat in 2002 at Birmingham, Alabama.

The Ecuadorans are 4-1 with four drawn against the US team, the only match not on US soil being a 2-0 home triumph in Quito during the 1993 Copa America.

The Americans play their first friendly of the year on Saturday against Denmark at Los Angeles and will meet Mexico on February 7 at Phoenix, Arizona.

After meeting Ecuador, the US men will have only three days before their next international test, a friendly against Guatemala at Dallas, Texas.

The US team will try to defend their continental title at the 12-team CONCACAF Gold Cup from June 6-24 in US cities, then travel to South America's regional championship June 26 to July 15 in Venezuela.



Polish Sport minister Tomasz Lipiec speaks to the media in Warsaw on Friday.

Belletti set for Barca extension

AFP, Barcelona

Brazil international defender Juliano Belletti is set to sign a contract extension at Barcelona, the club's official website quoted him as saying Friday.

"I will stay. Barca have offered me a new contract and I have accepted it," said the fullback.

Belletti, who scored the winning goal in Barcelona's 2-1 Champions League final victory over Arsenal last May, also moved to quash rumours he is set to join AC Milan.

Belletti has Italian citizenship but has no intention of leaving Barca.

"I don't know anything about this rumour about Milan, it is a lie and you should not pay any attention to it," he added.

"Barca have made me an offer and I have accepted it. Next week, my brother (who is also his agent) will arrive in Barcelona to sort everything out."

FRENCH CUP Nantes through

AFP, Paris

World Cup winner Fabian Barthez conceded his first goal in Nantes's colours but still saw his side progress to the last 16 of the French Cup with a 3-1 win at second division Amiens on Friday.

Nantes seemed to be cruising to victory at half-time, already a goal to the good and with a man advantage.

Belgian forward Luigi Pieroni gave the visitors the lead from the spot in first half injury time after David Vairelles was harshly adjudged to have handled. To make matters worse he was also given his marching orders.

Just before the hour mark it seemed all over as Pieroni notched his second of the game, and third for Nantes since his January transfer window arrival.

But the ten-men of the second division hosts pulled a goal back through Bertrand Fayolle on 76-minutes and snuffed a shock draw until Kenyan forward Dennis Oliech sealed the win deep into stoppage time.

British FM backs WC bid

AFP, London

Britain's finance minister Gordon Brown, tipped to succeed Tony Blair as prime minister this year, suggested Friday he wanted England to host and win the 2018 World Cup over his native Scotland.

However, Brown backtracked later, saying his ideal scenario would be for Scotland to win the final against hosts England. If England reached the final without Scotland, he added, he would transfer his allegiance to England.

His remarks to BBC television were seen as the latest attempt by Brown to woo English voters in the event that Brown has to call snap general elections if he succeeds Blair by September, the date Blair has promised to leave office.

Interviewed during a tour of India, Brown said he would be happy to see England again host and win the World Cup in 2018, more than half a century after it staged a similar feat against Germany in 1966.

"It will be great, 50 years after we had it before. It's the right time for England to have it," the Scotsman said.

"It means that we would have had the most magnificent sporting decade," with not just the World Cup but also the 2012 Olympics.

"All the effort to win England's place for the World Cup has got to happen in the next year or two," he said.

Asked then who he wanted to win the World Cup, Brown replied: "I think the host."

When asked "Not Scotland?" Brown replied: "Well, of course, I want Scotland to do well, but let's just see how it all works out."

Immediately after the interview was broadcast, the chancellor of the exchequer, who is member of parliament for Kirkcaldy in eastern Scotland and a regular at his local team Raith Rovers, issued a "clarification."

He said: "My ideal scenario is that England meets Scotland in the World Cup Final, and Scotland win the World Cup."

"However, if Scotland didn't qualify or went out of the tournament before England, then I would transfer (...) allegiance to the other home nation, England," he said.

Brown and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell last year launched a joint study into whether it would feasible for England to host the 2018 World Cup.

During the World Cup in Germany last year, many English fans were upset because Scottish soccer fans supported any team but England even though Scotland failed to qualify for the tournament.

Make or break for Gunners

AFP, London Colney

We've done it away from home, why shouldn't we do it at home?

"We are in good form. They are as well so it is a very promising game. I feel both teams will go for it because United are a team that tries to score goals and we try to score goals."

Wenger said the gap between the two sides in the table was down to Arsenal's indifferent early season results at their new north London home after they quit nearby former base Highbury and United's record against 'lesser' sides.

"The difference is basically the fact that at the Emirates, we dropped some points. They (United) have been more consistent against the teams which don't fight for the championship."

Arsenal haven't lost in the league to any of their top four rivals so far this season but have suffered defeats against the likes of Fulham, West Ham, Manchester City and Sheffield United.

"If you look at what we did against Liverpool, Chelsea and United, we have done very well. We dropped some points against teams in the second-half of the table, away from home as well," said Wenger.

Arsenal will be without injured defender William Gallas on Sunday while influential Brazil mid-fielder Gilberto is suspended.

But Wenger hinted at an intriguing plan to cope with a United attack atop the Premiership scoring chart with 52 goals already this season.

"You cannot afford having one player who does not defend well in his department. I have an idea in my head. But if I gave you the idea, you wouldn't believe me."

Arsenal are unbeaten in nine league matches since losing 2-1 to Fulham in November and Wenger added: "The essential for us is to continue our run and it is important we finish the season well. To do that it is very, very important to be strong at the Emirates."

"We had a little bit of a hesitant start at the Emirates but since October I feel we are really at home when we play there."

United have lost just twice in the Premiership this season - their other defeat was against West Ham - and Wenger admitted: "After their defeat against us, we were six points (behind them) and today it is 15 points."

The build-up to recent fixtures involving the sides has often centred around a verbal spat between Wenger and United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

But there has been no such 'row' in the run-up to this game and Wenger said that was partly down to Chelsea's emergence as a major force under their outspoken manager Jose Mourinho.

"In the last two seasons, it has become a little better," said Wenger of his relationship with Ferguson. "Maybe it's because Chelsea have come in. It has focused the attention on Chelsea."

Raul hits out at Calderon

Football

AFP, Madrid

actor".

"The chairman is the chairman and he can talk when he wants but his declarations created a malaise and were not opportune," said Raul, one of few survivors of the pre-Beckham era which brought the 2003 league title - the club's last major honour to date.

"As a player I hope there is no repeat of such a thing," Raul concluded at a press conference where he said he hoped the chairman would refrain from such loose talk in future.

Calderon, who made a series of observations which included the view that in general his team was vain and not especially civilised,

later apologised "a thousand times" on Real Madrid TV for his indiscreet observations.

Raul said that when he met the players to explain himself "face to face," Calderon had "asked for forgiveness and apologised" during what had ended up as a "positive" meeting.

Third in the table, but hoping to capitalise on recent slip-ups by main title rivals Seville and Barcelona, Real saw another trophy avenue close Thursday when Real Betis dumped them out of the Spanish Cup.

The club will try to put a week of turmoil and strife behind them with a win at Real Mallorca on Sunday.



Real Madrid captain Raul Gonzalez ponders a question during a press conference in Madrid on Friday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	41	Do	42	Suturing	43	Happy	44	Mortar	45	Began to	46	Urban	47	Past	48	Tier	49	Atmosphere	50	Disen-	51	Summer-	52	Bit of	53	Act as a	54	Pendulum's	55	Sheltered	56	Neigh-	57	Neigh-	58	Shrub	59	Indigent	60	Heavy	61	4-Across	62	Sister of	63	Sinbad's	64	Boy's	65	Group of	66	Nails a	67	Family	68	Picture	69	Hide	70	Albacore	71	Command	72	Set of	73	Altar	74	Every last	75	crumb	76	affirmative	77	FALIK	78	WILDE	79	ELAEGANCE	80	STAKE	81	WET	82	ELAEGANCE	83	EDITION	84	RODRE	85	DATA	86	TOOT	87	LYFE	88	WILDE	89	SHUN	90	ALP	91	FOAM	92	TOOT	93	LYFE	94	WILDE	95	SHUN	96	ALP	97</
--------	----	----	----	----------	----	-------	----	--------	----	----------	----	-------	----	------	----	------	----	------------	----	--------	----	---------	----	--------	----	----------	----	------------	----	-----------	----	--------	----	--------	----	-------	----	----------	----	-------	----	----------	----	-----------	----	----------	----	-------	----	----------	----	---------	----	--------	----	---------	----	------	----	----------	----	---------	----	--------	----	-------	----	------------	----	-------	----	-------------	----	-------	----	-------	----	-----------	----	-------	----	-----	----	-----------	----	---------	----	-------	----	------	----	------	----	------	----	-------	----	------	----	-----	----	------	----	------	----	------	----	-------	----	------	----	-----	------