

Divided press

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's sports press have given a mixed reception to Brazilian striker Ronaldo after he completed his transfer from Real Madrid to AC Milan.

Milan-based sports daily La Gazzetta dello Sport applauded the signing of the three-times FIFA World Player of the Year, who began angling for a transfer after falling out with Real coach Fabio Capello.

Ronaldo, who is ineligible to play for the club in Europe this season, would add momentum to Milan's drive for a fourth-place finish in Serie A and qualification for next season's Champions League, the paper said.

"Ronaldo has enough charisma for both the dressing room and the sponsors. If he is fit, he remains the best finisher around.

"His presence means that Milan's other strikers can be rested ready for the Champions League, and the club can concentrate on finishing fourth, which is their big target."

Corriere dello Sport, however, was less enthusiastic.

Milan's decision to pay Real 7.5 million euros for the 30-year-old Brazilian was not in line with "its declared intention to invest in young players", argued the paper.

"He is one of the greats of world football -- that is beyond discussion," it said.

"It is reasonable to ask oneself, however, in what condition has he arrived from Spain, how much of the great Ronaldo remains after his long and not particularly fortunate experience in Madrid, and how long we will have to wait before seeing him back to his best?"

Milan have not announced when they plan to hold their first news conference with Ronaldo but,

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Real's word of gratitude

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid on Tuesday thanked Brazil international Ronaldo for the memories as they sold him off to AC Milan on an 18-month contract.

"This afternoon Real Madrid completed the transfer of Ronaldo Luis Nazario de Lima to AC Milan," the club said in a statement after the 30-year-old striker completed the deal to take him back to Italy, where he played for Inter Milan for five years before coming to Spain in 2002.

"Real Madrid want to pass on their recognition of this singular footballer for what he has achieved over this time through providing moments of great football which 'madridistas' will never forget," the club added on their official website.

"One hundred and four goals in the white shirt and his trophy record perfectly describe one of the best players to have worn our number nine shirt.

"Now, with the time having come to say goodbye, Real Madrid want to reiterate their thanks to Ronaldo and to wish him all the best sporting success and, above all, maximum personal happiness," the club said in parting with the three-time FIFA World Player of the Year.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian superstar Ronaldo waves to fans as he leaves Milanello, the AC Milan training centre in Carnago on Wednesday. The 30-year-old striker signed an 18-month contract with the Italian giants for a fee believed to be 7.5 million euros (9.7 million dollars).

Ronaldo relishing Milan challenge

Football

AFP, Milan

Brazilian megastar Ronaldo said he hoped he could fulfil the dreams of AC Milan fans after leaving Real Madrid to join the six-time European champions on Tuesday.

After two weeks of negotiations between the two clubs, the 30-year-old striker finally signed an 18-month contract with the Italian giants for a fee believed to be 7.5 million euros (9.7 million dollars).

The transfer brings Ronaldo back to northern Italy after a near five-year absence having played for Milan's city rivals Inter for five years before signing for Real in

2002.

"I hope I can fulfil the dreams of the AC Milan fans," Ronaldo said on his arrival at Milan's Linate airport.

"It's all a bit overwhelming, but I am happy to be here and glad that the transfer has finally gone through. It's a great feeling to be back in Milan."

Earlier Ronaldo had expressed his sadness at leaving Real before jumping on the plane from Madrid.

"It's sad to say goodbye after four-and-a-half years, but now I have an important challenge ahead of me," said the Brazil international. "It hurts me to leave, it breaks my heart, but that's life."

Ronaldo, the highest scorer in World Cup history with 15 goals,

had fallen out of favour with Real coach Fabio Capello and was becoming increasingly frustrated at his lack of first-team football.

And he couldn't resist taking a final swipe at Capello before saying 'adios' to the Spanish capital.

"I want to thank the fans and all the coaches that I've worked with -- except one," said the three-time FIFA World Player of the Year.

Ronaldo then softened up, saying his relationship with Capello was not as bad as reported in the press.

"Lots of things have been said, but I've never had the slightest problem with the coach," he said.

"He didn't want me, and I am a

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2

A muted send-off

REUTERS, Madrid

Three-times World Player of the Year Ronaldo was given a muted send-off by the Spanish media on Wednesday after his 7.5 million-euro (\$9.72 million) move from Real Madrid to AC Milan.

The normally Real Madrid-obsessed sports daily Marca practically ignored the player on its front pages, preferring instead to concentrate on Formula One world champion Fernando Alonso and his pre-season testing sessions in Valencia.

The regular papers limited their coverage to brief information pieces, while sports daily AS was the only one to devote significant space to the departure of the 30-year-old Brazilian.

AS focused on Ronaldo's thinly veiled criticisms of Real coach Fabio Capello who effectively forced the striker to leave the Bernabeu and went on to examine the end of the Galactico era at the club.

"Madrid has impoverished its squad, the shining brilliance of the Galacticos has gone, but that is not the worst thing," said editor Alfredo Relano.

"The worst thing is that the galaxy has been killed off because of the indecisions and brutishness of Capello who hasn't lived up to expectations in any respect."

Fans appeared to be evenly divided as to whether the decision to sell Ronaldo was a wise one, with 54 percent of the nearly 25,000 fans polled by Marca saying Real had made a mistake and 46 per cent agreeing with the club's decision.

Rival players and coaches, however, were unanimous in their belief that Ronaldo's departure would be a major loss for a domestic competition that has become

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Tiger wishes Becks success

AFP, Dubai

David Beckham's quest for superstardom in the United States has drawn support from current top draw Tiger Woods.

The wealthiest and best recognised sportsman in the world said that the former England skipper knows what he is doing in moving from Spanish powerhouses Real Madrid to the footballing backwaters of the LA Galaxy.

"I think in Los Angeles, we've lost basically two football teams, the Rams and the Raiders moved out," he said.

"Now we're looking for something else and I think with David's star power there, I think it will bring another notch and another thing for all of us in southern California to come out and watch and observe."

Woods though made it known that star-quality or not, he would not be changing his schedule to follow Beckham's progress.

Asked if he was a Galaxy fan or if he followed any team's results, he made it clear that when it came to sport he was traditional American through and through.

"Yeah, I like to watch, but as far as me following soccer religiously like people over here do, no," he said. "I'm more of a basketball/baseball/football kind of guy."

Magath gets Bayern axe

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich have sacked coach Felix Magath and plan to replace him with former boss Ottmar Hitzfeld, according to a report by Bild newspaper on Wednesday.

A club spokesman said that he could not confirm the report, which said the 20-times German champions would appoint Hitzfeld until the end of the season.

Magath replaced Hitzfeld in July 2004 and guided the club to league and cup doubles in each of his first two seasons in charge.

PSG keep Cup hopes alive

Football

AFP, Paris

Paul Le Guen's Paris Saint Germain safely booked their place in the French Cup quarterfinals with a 1-0 win over Valenciennes on Tuesday.

Valenciennes proved the bogey side for Le Guen's predecessor Guy Lacombe, who was dismissed after PSG lost to them earlier this month.

Le Guen's outfit ensured no such repeat when Cristian Rodriguez produced the only goal of the game in the 55th minute.

But the capital side's cause was helped considerably by Valenciennes' Uruguayan keeper Nicolas Penneteau who let the ball slip safely from his clutches at Rodriguez' feet.

"We needed a good result to help our confidence," said Le Guen, brought in to save PSG's season after leaving Scottish giants Rangers in ignominious fashion after less than a season in charge.

Third division Vannes made it into the Cup last eight for the first time in their modest history after a 2-0 extra time win over second division Montpellier.

The Brittany minnows stunned the favourites for this on paper at least mismatched last 16 tie with Jerome Le Bouc's 100th minute strike.

The former Rennes and Nantes player was then instrumental in Vannes' second two minutes later when he set up Cedric Rjillo to keep their cup adventure well and truly alive.

"It's great that our adventure is continuing," said the club captain Christophe Le Roux.

"I take my hat off to the team." Earlier Sochaux knocked out former Champions League finalists Monaco 2-0, the goals coming either side of the break from Romain Pitau and former Liverpool striker Anthony Le Tallec.

Monaco were whistled off by their home supporters at the Stade Louis-II after this tepid display.

"We deserved what we got," said Monaco's Sylvain Monsoreau.

"We didn't play, Sochaux taught us a lesson."

Monaco's night was made worse after their Ivory coast international

Bayern sold midfielder and Germany captain Michael Ballack to Chelsea at the end of last season and their form this term has suffered as a result.

They finished the first half of the campaign in third place in the Bundesliga, three points behind Werder Bremen and Schalke 04.

They have managed just a point from their two matches since the restart, a 3-2 defeat at Borussia Dortmund and a goalless draw at home to relegation candidates Bochum on Tuesday.

Those two results have left them in fourth place, and they will slip eight points off the pace if one or both of the co-leaders win

their league matches on Wednesday night.

In fact, Magath wrote off the side's chances of making up the distance in the wake of Tuesday's home draw with Bochum.

"We don't need to talk about the title any more," Magath told reporters. "We have to make sure of getting second or third."

Bayern are also out of the German Cup after losing to modest Alemannia Aachen in December.

They do remain in with a chance of winning the European Cup -- a competition they last won under Hitzfeld in 2001 -- with a second round Champions League tie to come against Real Madrid.

Yaya Toure had to come off with a torn ankle muscle.

First division Sedan overcame the banana skin presented by their second division opponents Libourne-Saint-Seurin, but only after a fightback.

Libourne took the lead one minute from the interval with Yahia Kebe's close range goal but they will have been kicking themselves for

not converting at least half a dozen live chances.

Sedan levelled shortly after retaking the pitch thanks to former Cameroon international striker Joseph-Desire Job who pounced on some sloppy defending and he then produced the winner 20 minutes from time.



PHOTO: AFP

Paris Saint Germain's David Rozehnal (R) and Valenciennes' Thomas Dossevi are in a tangle during their French Cup match at the Parc des Princes in Paris on Tuesday.

Domenech no Matrix fan

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech on Monday stuck the boot in on stricken Italy international Marco Materazzi after the centre-back was the victim of another headbutt.

Materazzi, who was famously felled by a Zinedine Zidane headbutt in last year's World Cup final, was butted again on Sunday by Sampdoria's Gennaro Delvecchio.

But Domenech told L'Equipe TV that Materazzi "has a habit of falling over easily" before adding mischievously, "he must have a weakness somewhere."

The Inter Milan player, who scored Italy's goal in the World Cup final that saw them win eventually in a penalty shootout, claimed afterwards that he did not provoke Delvecchio in Sunday's fractious Serie A match.

Inter maintained their 11-point lead at the top of the table and extended their record run of consecutive league wins to 14 matches with a 2-0 victory in Genoa.

But the game swung heavily in Inter's favour in the seventh minute when Delvecchio was sent off for headbutting Materazzi squarely on the chin.

Materazzi, who reacted angrily when Delvecchio caught Inter keeper Julio Cesar with a late challenge, insisted he did nothing wrong.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool's Dutch striker Dirk Kuyt (2nd from R) celebrates the opening goal against West Ham during their Premiership match at Upton Park in London on Tuesday.

Reds compound Hammers woes

AFP, London



liverpool gave West Ham a lesson in finishing at Upton Park as two brilliant goals from Dirk Kuyt and Peter Crouch decided this Premiership encounter 2-1 in the visitors' favour.

Kuyt's long distance drive opened the scoring just after half-time, and seven minutes later Crouch tucked the ball beyond Roy Carroll after a well-worked move.

A debut goal for substitute Kepa Blanco gave West Ham hope on 77 minutes, but the defeat means that Alan Curbishley has now won just one of his eight league games as their manager.

Victory moves Liverpool within two points of second placed Chelsea, while West Ham are left in the bottom three.

In a bid to stop the rot, Curbishley made three changes from the side which lost to Watford in the FA Cup at the weekend, including Marlon Harewood in favour of Bobby Zamora.

Sami Hyypia and Craig Bellamy returned to Rafa Benitez's starting line-up, and

Liverpool's 4-3-3 formation caused initial problems for West Ham.

George McCartney made a great stop on six minutes to deny Crouch, and then Jamie Carragher blazed over the bar following a well-worked free-kick.

Xabi Alonso came close for Liverpool on 31 minutes, but it was just after that miss West Ham sparked into life.

A great turn and shot by captain Nigel Reo-Coker brought the home supporters to their feet, and then on 34 minutes Harewood came even closer to breaking the deadlock.

His superb 25-yard drilled shot was heading for the far corner of Pepe Reina's goal, but the Spanish goalkeeper managed to tip the ball wide at full stretch to send the sides in an even terms at half-time.

Whatever it was that Benitez said in the 15 minute interval worked wonders, as it took just 12 seconds of the second half for his side to find the net.

Straight from kick off Steven Gerrard picked out Crouch, who in turn found strike partner Kuyt.

The Dutchman hit a first time effort from 25 yards which flew straight over Carroll, off the underside of the crossbar, and

into the net. It was a wonderful strike, and marked Kuyt's ninth Premiership goal of the term.

Moments later Gerrard almost produced a carbon copy strike, and on 53 minutes Liverpool virtually sealed the points after a superb demonstration of pass and move football.

The build up play involved Gerrard, Alonso and Bellamy, before John Arne Riise's cut-back teed up Crouch to side-foot the ball into the top corner from the edge of the area.

Curbishley was left with his head in his hands, and Bellamy almost added to the woe as he came close with three efforts in quick succession.

Harewood had a penalty appeal turned down after a challenge by Riise as West Ham moved forward in hope of a lifeline.

Harewood was then replaced, as Blanco made his bow with 15 minutes remaining.

Within 90 seconds he made his mark too, sliding in to convert a cross from Zamora six yards out.

They were unable to find the leveller though, as Luis Boa Morte's last minute fall in the area proved their last hope of salvaging a point.