

PORTUGAL TRIUMPH OVER BRAZIL

Big Phil does the double

Football

AFP, London

Cristiano Ronaldo endured a torrid time as he was singled out for punishment by the crowd and his opponents in Portugal's 2-0 friendly win against Brazil in London on Tuesday which saw them inflict the first defeat for Brazil coach Dunga in seven matches in charge.

Manchester United winger Ronaldo was jeered throughout the match at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium and had to withstand some fierce tackles before being taken off midway through the second half.

Ronaldo was at least able to celebrate a victory as late goals from Simao Sabrosa and Ricardo Carvalho clinched a notable success over the five-time World Cup winners.

Ronaldo, back in the English capital just three days after he was accused of diving to earn a penalty in United's win at Tottenham, has grown used to being taunted this season after his role in Wayne Rooney's dismissal when Portugal beat England in the World Cup.

He has responded with some scintillating displays that have been instrumental in United's Premiership challenge this season, as well as taking him to the top of the English league's goalscoring charts.

It had been reported that Barcelona were planning to send scouts to the match to watch Ronaldo, with a view to making a 45 million pound offer to buy him at the end of the season.

Any watching spies would have left relatively unimpressed as the Portugal captain was content to stay on the fringes of the game after Edmilson was booked for a rash lunge on him.

Brazil, without star midfielders Ronaldinho and Robinho through injury, were playing in London for the third time in six months as they continued their self-imposed exile.

The South Americans are yet to play in front of their own fans since Dunga took charge in August because the Brazilian football federation has opted to swap home comforts for the lure of lucrative friendlies in Europe.

At least Dunga had happy memories of the Emirates Stadium after Brazil's win over Argentina here in September.

Shakhtar Donetsk winger Elano had been the hero of that victory and he was close to opening the scoring in the fifth minute with a swerving free-kick that Ricardo did well to push over for a corner.

Brazil had suffered their first defeat against Portugal for 37 years when the countries last met in 2003 and they looked determined to get

revenge.

Rafael Sobis should have put them ahead in the 14th minute when a loose ball ran kindly for him in the penalty area, but his shot was too close to Ricardo.

While Brazil are regarded as guardians of the game's purist principles, Portugal are capable of breathtaking football of their own.

They play crucial Euro 2008 qualifiers against Belgium and Serbia next month and their Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, keen to ensure his players were well-drilled for those matches, named a full-strength team.

A perfect example of the attacking style was the flowing move that ended with Deco forcing a fine save from Helton after Ricardo Quaresma's pass had split the Brazil defence.

Brazil almost took the lead on the stroke of half-time when Elano's free-kick deflected to Lucio and the defender lashed a shot on the crossbar from close range.

But Portugal looked the more likely winners in the second half and Simao broke the deadlock with a superb half-volley from Quaresma's cross in the 82nd minute.

Chelsea defender Carvalho put the result beyond doubt in the 89th minute when he met Hugo Viana's cross with a fine finish.

Scolari delighted

Football

REUTERS, London

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari said on Tuesday his team's 2-0 win over his compatriots from Brazil meant more in terms of preparation for their next European qualifier than personal satisfaction.

"Victory over a team that has been top of the world rankings and five-times world champion gives us more self-esteem and confidence before our next Euro qualifying match against Belgium," Scolari, who led Brazil to the fifth of those world titles in 2002, told a news conference.

Scolari has now been in charge of the last two matches Portugal has played against Brazil and Tuesday's win was the second time his Portuguese side had beaten his homeland.

"It was a very good game, and either side could have won," he said, "but we made the better use of our opportunities, although they had

more opportunities than us.

"It was a good technical game and I think the English fans enjoyed it. It was very much from the South American school of football, but Portugal are part of the South American school.

"More importantly, I think they gained a lot of confidence from the victory. It was a good chance to see some new players and observe how they reacted."

Scolari also said that Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo, who was 22 on Monday, was made captain at the request of Carlos Silva, the vice-president of the Portuguese FA, who died on Sunday.

Scolari explained: "On Saturday, Mr Silva asked me to make him captain as a gesture. He thought the English fans would give him a difficult time and this was a response. He is too young to be captain, but Mr Silva asked me, and now he is no longer with us."

A period of silence was observed before kick-off to mark his death. Ronaldo also asked the Portuguese FA not to organise any birthday

celebrations as a mark of respect for Silva's death.

Dunga, who lost his unbeaten record as Brazil coach in his sixth match in charge, braved a very cold night in north London wearing a garish shirt that looked like it would have been more at home in a 1970s disco than in the technical area of a football ground.

"I wore this shirt and no jacket because the adrenalin rush of the match kept me warm," he said.

He added: "When you lose it's always hard, a complete frustration."

He explained, however, that several players lost their edge in the second half through fatigue and the big names like Kaka were marked more tightly.

Scolari said he put Petit on Kaka in the second half and Tiago in the holding role, tightening his midfield line.

"We should have used the wings more," Dunga said.

He said that not having Ronaldinho and Robinho, who were nursing minor injuries, was not a factor and "when you lose it is entirely the coach's responsibility."



PHOTO: AFP

Portugal's stand-in captain Cristiano Ronaldo (L) evades a challenge from Brazil's Gilberto Silva during their friendly match at the Emirates Stadium in London on Tuesday.

Outrage at stadium closures

INTERNET, undated

Italian football clubs are resisting what they say are draconian measures to tackle hooliganism at stadiums after a policeman was killed during riots last week.

All play was suspended after the death and Sports Minister Giovanna Melandri has said stadiums which do not immediately adopt the new measures should remain closed to fans.

Italy's cabinet was due to meet at on Wednesday to finalise the measures which have outraged some people in the football world. Critics accuse the government of a knee-jerk reaction to an isolated incident.

The president of twice Italian champions Napoli, Aurelio De Laurentiis, said a "fascist climate" had descended on the country since the policeman's death at a Serie A

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Ayala to join Villarreal

REUTERS, Madrid

Valencia's Argentine international centre-back Roberto Ayala has agreed to join regional rivals Villarreal on a three-year deal at the end of the season.

Villarreal released a statement on Wednesday saying the 33-year-old, who is free to negotiate with other clubs because his present deal finishes at the end of the season, had signed a contract with them until June 2010.

Ayala will set a new Argentine record of 107 appearances when he leads his side out for their friendly against France in Paris on Wednesday.

Last August he said he wanted to leave Valencia after accusing the president and sporting director Amadeo Carboni of backtracking on a promised contract renewal.

The club opened disciplinary proceedings against the defender,

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Rijkaard staying put

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona vice-president Ferran Soriano has insisted that coach Frank Rijkaard will still be at Nou Camp next season despite speculation that he may be on his way out.

"The coach will finish his contract in June 2009," Soriano told Radio Barcelona.

"We have already started preparation for our next campaign with our orders and ideas. The world of football is always unpredictable but I am convinced that Rijkaard will not leave the club.

"His ties to Barcelona are not simply by a document."

Football

AFP, London

Brazil coach Dunga has told Ronaldinho to speak to him face to face if he is unhappy playing for his country.

Reports in England on Sunday suggested Ronaldinho had considered retiring from international football last month before being talked out of it by friends.

Ronaldinho missed Brazil's 2-0 friendly defeat - Dunga's first defeat in his seven matches in charge - against Portugal in London on Tuesday with a calf injury and he is believed to be exhausted after nearly three years of non-stop action for club and country.

But Dunga - Brazil's World Cup winning captain in 1994 - insisted he had no reason to think the Barcelona midfielder wanted to quit

and would not worry about it until he had spoken to him.

"It means a lot to speak face to face," Dunga said. "I have to speak directly to him.

"He hasn't been a problem to us. All of the problems I have with my players I speak directly to them. I am never going to work via the press. That is not the way I work."

Late goals from Simao and Ricardo Carvalho condemned Brazil to defeat at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium, but Dunga insisted the absence of Ronaldinho and Real Madrid winger Robinho was not the reason for the loss.

He said: "If we have a competition without Ronaldinho and Robinho, we have to be ready to play, we have lost and won with them before, we can't say it's down to that.

"I thought we would win but this is a test period. We have to give an opportunity for everyone to play.

Gerrard backs Benitez

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool's Steven Gerrard has reminded new owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks that he considers manager Rafael Benitez a fantastic boss in a hint not to make any changes in that regard.

The English Premiership giants on Tuesday accepted a 438-million pound (665-million euro) takeover offer from the American tycoons.

Gillett, who owns the National Hockey League's Montreal Canadiens, joined forces with Hicks, owner of the NHL's Dallas Stars and the Texas Rangers baseball team, to trump rival bidders Dubai International Capital last week.

Gerrard and club teammate

Jamie Carragher pulled no punches at their first meeting with Gillett and Hicks but presented the pair with a signed shirt each.

Gerrard said they keep faith with Benitez because he views the Spaniard as "one of the great geniuses of the modern game."

Gillett said: "They spoke extremely warmly about Rafa and made us aware that they feel this man is truly one of the great geniuses in the recent history of the sport.

"Secondly, they wanted to talk about players and to encourage us to support (chief executive) Rick (Parry) and Rafa's efforts in building the team.

"They were also clear with their views on the stadium. They made us aware the sound, the energy and the passion that Anfield provides needs to be incorporated into the

design of the new stadium."

The takeover means work is now expected to start on the new 60,000-seater Stanley Park stadium within the next two months, with the new owners also considering selling the naming rights on the ground.

Gillett and Hicks made clear, however, that there was no chance of sharing the stadium with Merseyside neighbours Everton.

The two sports tycoons also threw down the gauntlet to Manchester United and Chelsea by promising to make Liverpool the biggest and best club in the world.

They will be in direct competition with fellow Americans the Glazer family but, unlike United's owners, the two sports tycoons insist there will be no debt tied to Liverpool from their purchase.

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Serbia next month.

"There is nothing against my country," he said. "It doesn't matter if it is against England, France or The Netherlands. I have to think about the general good.

"The players will have gained more confidence and increased their credibility for the games we have to play soon.

"It is part of our journey to 2008, but our decisive games will be in March.

"This was a good opportunity to put different players in the team and observe their reactions. It gives us a complete idea of how we need to play in those important matches.

"It is a victory over a team that has been world champions five times and represents a little more self-esteem for us. It should give us more support for our game against

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Messi escapes brawl allegations

AFP, Buenos Aires

Barcelona's Argentinian midfielder Lionel Messi has been cleared of any involvement in a bar brawl, legal sources said on Wednesday.

A judge rejected a complaint brought against the 19-year-old by a bar owner in Rosario in the north of the country, saying there was not enough proof.

The incident occurred on January 19 when Messi and his brothers were drinking in a bar along with football supporters of the town's rival clubs Newell's Old Boys and Rosario Central.

Messi spent considerable time last month in Rosario where he was recovering from a broken bone in his left foot. He returned to Spain on February 2.

Aragones cleared over racist remarks

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain coach Luis Aragones has been cleared of racist conduct by a Spanish court after his derogatory remarks about France striker Thierry Henry in October 2004.

"The court found that the Spanish Committee for Sporting Discipline (CEDD) had incorrectly evaluated the evidence," the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) said in a statement.

"We now hope that all measures will be taken to clear the good name of the national coach and the RFEF disciplinary committees."

Aragones caused controversy in

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PHOTO: INTERNET

French football legend Zinedine Zidane watches an NBA match New York Knicks and Los Angeles Clippers at the Madison Square Garden in New York City on Tuesday.