



PHOTO: AFP

THE AFRICAN KING: Chelsea and Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba poses with his trophy after being named African Footballer of the Year on Thursday.

Drogba Africa's best footballer

AFP, Accra

Chelsea and Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba was on Thursday named African Footballer of the Year, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) announced on its website.

In 2006, Drogba helped Ivory Coast reach the final of the African Nations Cup and he also played in the World Cup finals.

He beat Barcelona and Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, the winner in 2003, 2004, 2005, into second place with his Chelsea teammate, Michael Essien of Ghana, in third place.

The 28-year-old Drogba scored both goals in Chelsea's League Cup final win over Arsenal last weekend. He also played in Chelsea's Premiership-winning teams of 2005 and 2006.

"It's a great honour to be recognised," said Drogba, the first Ivory Coast player to win the award.

"I feel an indescribable joy and it's also a reward for all the sacrifices I have made in the past."

Ghana, who reached the World Cup second round last year, were named team of the year.

The best club award went to Egypt's Al Ahly who defended their African Champions League title.

Al Ahly midfielder Mohamed Abou Treka was voted best player in CAF club competitions while his coach Jose Manuel took the coaching award.

Nigeria's Teye Taiwo and his compatriot Cynthia Uwak won the

Down The World Cup Lane

1992: The New World Cup

This was the World Cup that thought it was a league. All played all in a qualifying round that went on forever. It format fair, but about as exciting as the Nullarbor Plain. The good news was that South Africa joined in for the first time, following the end of apartheid.

It also saw four big innovations: 1. coloured clothing, with names on the back; 2. floodlights for most of the 36 games; 3. the white ball: in fact two of them, one at each end (so they didn't get too grubby); which meant they swung prodigiously and 4. the fielding circle rules were refined, allowing only two men outside the ring in the first 15 overs. After that, it was as before: a minimum of four inside the circle and result was the birth of the pinch-hitter with Ian Botham doing the job for England, with mixed results.

Australia, the holders and hosts, were such hot favourites that the pressure got to them. They lost the opening game, in New Zealand (Martin Crowe 100 not out), and then faced England at Sydney. Botham sniffed the chance to trample the Aussies into the dirt for one last time, took 4 for 31 and then made 53 not out as England won by eight wickets.

Pakistan started dreadfully, losing to West Indies by 10 wickets, and would have gone out if rain had not saved them at Adelaide after England bowled them out for 74. England and New Zealand were the best teams for a long time, but both had peaked too soon. Imran Khan famously told his team: "Listen, just be as if you were a cornered tiger," and they moved into top gear.

What's the Afrikaans for "We wuz robbed"? In the second semi-final, South Africa, playing England, needed 22 off 13 balls when it rained. By the time it stopped, they needed 21 off one ball. However, Kepler Wessels had chosen to bat second, and South Africa had bowled terribly slowly. New Zealand's brave run came to an end as Pakistan successfully chased 262, with the unknown Inzamamul Haq thumping 60 off 37 balls.

In the final Pakistan were on fire, and England were not. Derek Pringle (3 for 22) removed the openers, but Imran Khan and Javed Miandad (44 and 57 not out in the semifinal respectively) made 72 and 58 respectively as Pakistan recovered to 249 for 6. England were soon 69 for 4 (Botham out for

nought), and just when Neil Fairbrother (62) and Allan Lamb (31) launched a recovery, Wasim Akram snuffed it out, bowling Lamb and Chris Lewis with consecutive beauties. Pakistan won by 22 runs.

However the fifth edition of the gala event saw a whole herd of giants head into the sunset. Imran never played again, Botham managed one last injury-ravaged summer, and it was also the last World Cup for Graham Gooch, Allan Border, Allan Lamb, Desmond Haynes and so on.

It was also the first hurrah for a number of players. Haynes's opening partner was a young thruster named Brian Lara. Mushtaq Ahmed shone for Pakistan, and Jonty Rhodes became the first superstar fielder.

And many would never forget that Crowe opened New Zealand's bowling with Dipak Patel's off-spin. When England met India at Perth, Botham faced Sachin Tendulkar for the only time in an international: a fascinating little duel ended with Tendulkar caught behind for 35.

--Source: CricInfo

Beckham vows to keep fighting

AFP, London

Former England captain David Beckham said in an interview published Friday that he was now an "underdog" but claimed he could still "perform at a high level" for another three or four years.

Speaking to The Sun tabloid, the Real Madrid midfielder said: "Whether I get the chance to play for England again is not my decision but I'm a fighter and if I get that chance again I'll take it."

"I still believe I can perform at a high level and that I've got three or four years left," Beckham said, telling the tabloid that he would "still be available for England when I'm playing" in Los Angeles for the Galaxy, whom he will join at the end of the season.

"I will never retire from England, never."

Beckham, who has 94 caps, has been out of the England squad since Steve McClaren took over the England job after the World Cup and has so far not been used during the Euro 2008 qualifying campaign.

The midfielder also told of how the decision to join the Galaxy was entirely his, and his wife Victoria -- who also used to be "Posh" with the Spice Girls -- only wanted what was best for him and their three sons.

"Going to Los Angeles is absolutely my decision... I drove it all."

Beckham also echoed comments made by his wife earlier this week, insisting that he and his family live much more docile lives than British tabloids portray.

He told The Sun: "People have said we're going because we're affected by the Hollywood glitz. But I'm not sure that, as a family, we actually enjoy that side of it."

Soccer overshadowed by violence

AFP, Madrid



Hooliganism's ugly shadow has put Spain's top of the table clash on Saturday between Barcelona and Sevilla in the shade.

Sevilla's midweek Spanish Cup tie with city rivals Betis was abandoned when a bottle thrown from the crowd knocked out their coach Juande Ramos.

The Spanish Football Federation and the country's anti-violence commission have warned they intend to take a tough line amid media forecasts that Betis could have their Ruiz de Lopera stadium shut for up to a dozen matches.

"If we don't root out this problem we will end up like Italy and South American countries," said Ramos.

The incident came a month after a policeman died in crowd trouble in Sicily following a game between Catania and Palermo.

While Ramos was being treated some Betis fans threw bottles at the ambulance as he lay inside.

Eight years ago, a knife was thrown at Betis midfielder Benjamin during a match at Sevilla's Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium.

Thursday also saw Barcelona goalkeeper Albert Jorquera hit by a plastic bottle after his team won at Real Zaragoza.

On Saturday, Sevilla will again be in the limelight as they try to secure a home win over Barcelona

which would put them top of the tree. Barca have 49 points from 24 games to Sevilla's 47 with Valencia and Real Madrid four points further back.

The Catalan club may have Samuel Eto'o back in harness but even the Cameroon hitman will have his work cut out to keep the reigning European champions' show on the rails this week as the Catalan club prepare for Saturday's tough trip before heading to Liverpool for a do-or-die Champions League showdown.

Eto'o was out for four months with a serious knee injury but returned to full action with a goal in last Sunday's win over Bilbao.

Before that he had briefly fallen out with both coach Frank Rijkaard and teammate Ronaldinho.

But having pronounced himself "very happy to return to the starting line-up" after missing the home Champions League defeat to Liverpool, Eto'o now requires the broadest of shoulders for two vital awaydays.

Barca lost their last La Liga

outing on their travels to Valencia but they did at least survive without Eto'o as they overturned a one-goal home deficit to reach the Spanish Cup semifinals in midweek as Xavi and Iniesta hit the target against Real Zaragoza.

Sevilla, whose only league title success came in 1946, will look to centre-forward, Mali international Fredi Kanoute, to deliver with Brazilian forward Luis Fabiano out through suspension.

Valencia will seek to consolidate their top four status ahead of a Champions League return against Inter Milan with a home success over strugglers Celta Vigo in Saturday's other match.

Sunday will see Real Madrid try to build on a fortuitous draw at city rivals Atletico with three points at the Bernabeu against Getafe, who under Bernd Schuster have become a team with hopes of a UEFA Cup slot.

A shock win would take the side from the Madrid suburbs to the fringes of the top six -- while also boosting Schuster's profile as a potential successor to Fabio Capello.

Also Sunday, Atletico Madrid, having failed to cut the three-point gap on Real in last week's derby, travel to Recreativo Huelva, whose third spell in the top flight is exceeding expectations.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Valencia v Celta Vigo (1900), Seville v Barcelona (2100)
Sunday
Espanyol v Villarreal, Real Mallorca v Levante, Real Zaragoza v Real Sociedad, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Betis, Athletic Bilbao v Gimnastic Tarragona, Racing Santander v Osasuna
Real Madrid v Getafe (1800), Recreativo Huelva v Atletico Madrid (2000)

Ronaldinho tops China poll

AFP, Beijing

Chinese football fans have voted Barcelona's Ronaldinho their favourite foreign footballer, according to a survey released this week.

The 2004 and 2005 World Player of the Year won 10.67 per cent of 29,832 votes cast in the poll organised by the sports newspaper Titan Sports.

Next came his Brazilian teammate Kaka of AC Milan, who finished with 7.69 per cent of the vote ahead of Real Madrid's former England captain David Beckham, third with 7.64 per cent.

Frenchman Thierry Henry who plays for Arsenal was fourth with Portuguese international Cristiano Ronaldo of Manchester United fifth.

Despite his decision to retire after the World Cup in Germany last year, former French captain Zinedine Zidane still made it into the top 10, finishing eighth with 6.34 per cent.

Youzhny reaches Dubai final

AFP, Dubai

Mikhail Youzhny, one of the three hottest players on the ATP Tour at the moment, continued his career-best start to a season by Friday reaching back-to-back finals.

The 24-year-old Russian won the Rotterdam title last week, overcame French Open champion Rafael Nadal on Thursday and reached the final of the Dubai Open Friday, brimming full of confidence during a 7-5, 6-2 win over Robin Soderling.

It gave Youzhny a 18-4 win-loss record so far in 2007 and his continued excellent form was the more remarkable given that he finished at close to midnight the night before against Nadal and was obliged to return to court within 14 hours.

"When you beat the number two in the world you always have power to play," Youzhny said. "Even if you have not slept well and are not fresh. It gives you power."

"I had around eight hours sleep, but I wanted more for sure. But after a few games I woke up. I shall need more sleep tonight for sure."

That is because Youzhny's probable opponent will be Roger Federer, the top-seeded world number one, who plays fifth-seeded German Tommy Haas in the other semifinal.

Youzhny's improvement has been cumulative, the process of winning matches making him mentally stronger, though his brilliantly-timed backhand drive has been a constant threat and his service especially potent this week.

When he was 15-40 down in the eighth game he served solidly to get out of trouble, and for much of the match his first delivery was extremely effective.

More than 90 percent of the time it led to his winning the rally and almost three-quarters of the time he landed it in.

The break of serve he achieved in the eleventh game not only gained him the first set, it turned the match. From then on Soderling's level dropped and Youzhny broke him three times.

Afterwards he gave thanks to

CRICINFO, undated



The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has taken strong objection to the recent remarks of Malcolm Speed, the International Cricket Council (ICC) chief executive, about Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif with regards to the doping issue, calling them "unwarranted" and "irresponsible".

The board has sent an official letter of protest to the ICC.

Speed, while talking about the ICC's policy of targeted dope tests in the forthcoming World Cup, had called the whole affair of Shoaib and Asif continuing to play cricket after having tested positive for a banned anabolic steroid an "embarrassment" for the game.

Nasim Ashraf, the PCB chairman, told Cricinfo, that Speed's comments were unbecoming and inflammatory. "The board takes strong objection to the irresponsible remarks by Malcolm Speed to a case that is subjudice," said Ashraf, referring to the fact that the overturning of the bans on both players was referred to the International Court of Sports Arbitration by WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency).

"Both players were voluntarily dope-tested and withdrawn from the Champions Trophy after which the due legal process of the PCB's anti-doping code was strictly followed," added Ashraf. "They were let off by an appellate tribunal after which the ICC has admitted it had no legal grounds over the case. WADA has filed a case over it and the matter is now subjudice. These remarks then are utterly irresponsible and unwarranted."

The chairman also criticised the statements of two international players he did not wish to name who had also lashed out at the possible inclusion of the fast bowling pair in Pakistan's World Cup squad. "I don't want to mention the names of the two top international players from a top cricket country but I would like the ICC to examine whether the remarks made by them constitute a breach of a certain code of conduct."

Shoaib and Asif were finally dropped from the Pakistan squad yesterday for medical reasons. While injuries to one's knee and the other's elbow is the official reason given by the board for their withdrawal, speculation in Pakistan has centred around fears that the duo

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PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer poses for photographers beside the logo of Germany's bid to host the women's World Cup in 2011, in Berlin on Thursday.

MU face Anfield hurdle

AFP, London



Rio Ferdinand insists nothing can be decided this weekend but it would take a brave man to bet against Manchester United reclaiming the Premiership title if they can beat Liverpool at Anfield on Saturday.

Victory in the lunchtime clash would stretch United's advantage over Chelsea to 12 points, at least for the few hours before the champions take on Portsmouth at Fratton Park.

Even if Chelsea can win that match and avoid any slip-ups in their other game in hand, Jose Mourinho's squad would -- because of United's vastly superior goal difference -- still be left with the task of making up seven points on their rivals in the space of nine games.

On United's form this season that looks a tall order and it helps to explain why Mourinho was so frustrated to see Sir Alex Ferguson's side play well below par at Fulham last weekend and still emerge with a

win, thanks to Cristiano Ronaldo's late solo strike.

"Completely undeserved," Mourinho complained with some justification. And his mood will not have been improved by indications that his hugely influential skipper, John Terry, could be forced to rest for several weeks after being knocked unconscious by a flying boot in the League Cup final win over Arsenal.

United's current lead was opened up while Terry was recovering from back surgery over the Christmas and New Year period and

Mourinho will almost certainly have to rely once more on Michael Essien as a stand-in centreback at Portsmouth, at the expense of the Ghanaian's midfield drive.

United, in contrast, have enjoyed the luxury of a fully fit squad for most of the season while the increasing maturity of Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney has dovetailed nicely with the revitalised performances of the likes of Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes.

Presuming he plays at Anfield, Giggs will become only the second United player, after Sir Bobby Charlton, to have made 700 appearances for the club.

Liverpool's own title hopes may have disappeared but they are unbeaten in 30 league matches at Anfield, where United were eliminated from last season's FA Cup on their last visit.

Pride is also at stake in what is arguably the most competitive derby clash in English football. "I think it's getting enhanced each year and the media make a big thing of it -- the players feel that, the fans

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PHOTO: STAR

Dancers delight the festive crowd with a colourful display during the opening ceremony of the B. League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

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