

Portugal to miss Deco

AFP, Lisbon

Barcelona midfielder Deco has withdrawn from Portugal's squad for their Euro 2008 qualifiers against Belgium and Serbia in order to have surgery on his right hand.

The 29-year-old underwent surgery on Monday on the third finger on his right hand after he twisted it during Barcelona's 4-0 win over Recreativo Huelva in the Spanish League over the weekend.

Deco said he wanted to put off the surgery so as to play for Portugal during the two matches but was advised against it by Barcelona's medical department.

"I spoke to (Portugal coach Luiz Felipe) Scolari and told him I would really like to be with the team during these matches," he told reporters before entering the hospital in Barcelona where the surgery was held.

"But I also talked to Barcelona's doctor and he felt we couldn't wait. We made the decision to go ahead with the operation now," the Lusa news agency quoted him as saying.

Deco is expected be out for 10 to 15 days after the surgery. The Portuguese international had an operation on the same finger one year ago after he fell heavily on it.

Portugal face Belgium in Lisbon on Saturday and Serbia in Belgrade four days later. The squad lies in fourth place in Group A after Finland, Serbia and Poland.

FA will probe pitch invasion

AFP, London

The Football Association confirmed Tuesday they are investigating incidents at the end of Chelsea's FA Cup quarterfinal win at Tottenham.

Spurs officials will be contacted by the FA after two supporters ran onto the pitch after the final whistle of the replay at White Hart Lane on Monday night.

One of the fans threw a punch at England midfielder Frank Lampard as he celebrated Chelsea's 2-1 FA Cup quarter-final replay win.

An FA spokesman said: "These scenes were totally unacceptable and we will be contacting Spurs as a matter of priority.

"We want to establish what safety and security provisions were in place for the game and to confirm what action was taken against the fans who ran onto the pitch.

"We understand that both individuals were arrested and we would expect them to be given football banning orders."

Juventus enjoy handsome lead

AFP, Rome

Juventus cruised six points clear of Napoli at the top of the Serie B on Monday after a 5-1 drubbing of Triestina.

The 22-year-old Raffaele Palladino, who was standing in for the suspended French striker David Trezeguet, was in blistering form for the promotion hopefuls, netting a hatrick.

However it was the visitors that got off the mark first seven minutes into the game with Frederico Piovaccari finding the back of the net.

The response was immediate with veteran midfielder Mauro Camoranesi heading the home side level one minute later.

Palladino scored the next three for Juventus in what became a one-sided affair and 21-year-old Bulgarian international Valeri Bojinov wrapped up the game nine minutes from time.

Zyryanov, Borodin in Russian squad

AFP, Moscow

Russia coach Guus Hiddink on Tuesday called up Saint Petersburg midfielder Konstantin Zyryanov and Torpedo Moscow goalkeeper Dmitry Borodin for next weekend's Euro 2008 qualifier against Estonia after four players were sidelined with injuries.

CSKA full back Alexei Berezutsky, Dynamo defender Denis Kolodin and midfielder Igor Semshov were all injured during Sunday's Moscow derby.

Saint Petersburg goalie Vyacheslav Malafayev will also miss Saturday's Group E match at



PHOTO: AFP

Football's megastars and former Real Madrid teammates, Brazilian Ronaldo (R) and French Zinedine Zidane, arrive on the pitch on Monday in Marseille, southern France, prior an exhibition soccer match in which all profits will go to charity.

United in semifinals

AFP, Manchester



Cristiano Ronaldo's second half penalty was enough to secure Manchester United a single-goal victory over Middlesbrough in their FA Cup quarterfinal replay.

Alex Ferguson's side now face a semifinal clash with Watford after the Portuguese winger claimed his 18th goal of an outstanding season.

Ronaldo has been United's stand-out player in recent weeks and it was his late penalty that had kept his side in the competition when the two sides played out a 2-2 draw nine days previously.

Then with Ferguson's side struggling to match their recent form against a determined Boro, the 22-year-old forced a careless lunge from Jonathan Woodgate to earn the 76th minute spotkick he duly placed beyond keeper Marlon Schwarzer.

Then in the dying seconds of the game, Ronaldo's torment of the frustrated visitors was complete when he was hacked down by James Morrison earning the Boro substitute a straight red card.

Morrison's ugly lunge sparked a confrontation between both sets of players and assistant managers Carlos Queiroz and Malcolm Crosby exchanged angry words after the final whistle.

Prior to Ronaldo's match-winning intervention, United had looked a pale shadow of the side that harbours hopes of repeating their treble of 1999.

Surprisingly it was England striker Wayne Rooney who was responsible for ensuring Ferguson's side endured an uncomfortable night with two glaring misses after being sent clear on Schwarzer's goal.

Gareth Southgate's move to rest three key players -- Mark Viduka, Julio Arca and Jonathan Woodgate -- for the weekend defeat to Manchester City had provoked an angry response from Neil Warnock, manager of City's relegation rivals Sheffield United.

Southgate admitted the decision had been taken with this fixture in mind and initially appeared to be justified as Boro's energetic approach unsettled the home side.

With Paul Scholes serving the final game of a three-match suspension, Ryan Giggs slotted in alongside Michael Carrick in central midfield but the makeshift pairing at first struggled to match the more

upbeat display Arca and George Boateng.

And when Mark Viduka wastefully pulled a good opportunity wide when free on the edge of the United area, the visitors appeared capable of ending the home side's hopes of maintaining an interest on three fronts.

Slowly United made their presence felt with Cristiano Ronaldo once again the main focal point for their more impressive move.

For once, though, the Portuguese winger lacked his usual cutting edge and was guilty of over-elaborating after working his way into the Boro box in the 34th minute, allowing Woodgate to clear from the toe of the lurking Alan Smith.

And the sense that United were not at their ruthless grew when Rooney wasted the first of two good chances when he allowed Schwarzer to snuff out the opportunity.

But fears that the home side would pay for their sloppy finishing were eased when Boro's Stewart Downing missed a good 55th minute chance before Ronaldo's late intervention eased home nerves.

C'Ron defends diving storm



AFP, Manchester

Cristiano Ronaldo shrugged off his latest diving controversy by suggesting he attracts criticism "because I'm too good."

The Portuguese winger was once again accused of cheating after going to ground under a challenge from Middlesbrough's Jonathan Woodgate to win the penalty that booked Manchester United's place in the FA Cup semifinal.

Ronaldo himself converted the resulting spotkick to complete a hatrick of penalties against Boro in the side's three meetings this season.

Boro's frustration spilled over when James Morrison was sent off for an ugly lunge on the United

winger in added time before members of Southgate's coaching staff clashed with United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz.

The player himself protested his innocence and said: "It was the referee's decision but for me it was a penalty. Of course I felt contact. He touched me and that was why I went down."

"When teams come here they always seem to have something to say. I don't know why it is but there always seems to be some controversy when I play against Boro. Sometimes people don't like me. Maybe it's because I'm too good."

Southgate admitted his players and staff had lost their cool in the closing moments of the tie.

"I'm sure lots of things are said in the heat of the moment but this was an FA Cup quarterfinal," he said. "I'm still not sure whether it was a

penalty and I have seen it three times. Obviously the referee thought it was so that's it, end of story."

"We certainly lost our discipline in the last five minutes. James Morrison is a young kid and he has a lot to learn. In that situation we would all love to do what he did but you have got to be mature enough to make the right kind of tackle."

But Ronaldo's manager Alex Ferguson was incensed by Middlesbrough's reaction to his player, accusing the North-East club of creating a stigma against the Portuguese.

"Cristiano Ronaldo is unbelievable," Ferguson said. "I hear people saying it wasn't a penalty but it was a clear penalty. It's because it is Ronaldo. They are creating a stigma against the boy which isn't deserved."



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United's Wayne Rooney (L) confronts Middlesbrough's James Morrison as the latter leaves the pitch after being sent off during their FA Cup quarterfinal replay at Old Trafford yesterday.

Barcelona big guns to stay

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona sporting director Txiki Begiristain has quashed speculation about the future of the club's leading players including Ronaldinho and Samuel Eto'o by insisting they will remain at the Nou Camp.

"I'm totally convinced that Ronaldinho, Eto'o, Deco and Messi will be here next season," Begiristain told radiostation RAC1.

"They are all very happy at the club and associate their success with being here."

The Spanish media has reported that some of the club's big names may leave next season after interest from high-profile teams in Italy and England, but Begiristain denied that Barca had received any offers for the players.

"No club has spoken with us directly," he said. "There are always comments from intermediaries, but we've told all of them that there is no chance of a transfer."

Begiristain also refuted reports that Barca had opened negotiations with Manchester United in order to try and buy Cristiano Ronaldo although he left the door open to a possible future move for the Portugal forward.

"He's a good player but we haven't made any move to try and sign him," he said. "If none of our big players move then Cristiano Ronaldo won't be coming here."

The Barca sports director made no secret of the club's interest in Sevilla fullback Daniel Alves, but said that the Andalusian club were demanding too high a price for the Brazilian.

"It's outrageous what they are asking for. They have become accustomed to such figures because of the fees they got for (Jose Antonio) Reyes, (Julio) Baptista and (Sergio) Ramos."

Barcelona lead the Primera Liga from Sevilla by virtue of their better head-to-head record as they aim for a hatrick of league titles.

FIFA forgot about German army?

AFP, Berlin

The German army never received thanks from world football body FIFA for its work at last year's World Cup, the parliament's special commissioner for the military said on Tuesday.

"The organiser of the World Cup, FIFA, never felt disposed to give a clear sign of its recognition" of the army's efforts, Reinhold Robbe said in the presentation of his annual report for 2006.

The German army provided doctors and medical personnel for the month-long finals, although security duties were carried out mainly by the police.

It received thanks from the German federal government, state governments and the German Football Federation (DFB), but none from FIFA, Robbe said.

Benfica have to pay Porto

AFP, Lisbon

A Portuguese judge on Tuesday ordered Benfica to pay 600,000 euros in compensation to bitter rivals Porto for Hungarian striker Miklos Feher, who died in 2004.

Feher was playing for Benfica at the time and died on the pitch during a match after suffering a cardiac arrest.

He had previously played for Porto from 1998-2002 having arrived in the country from Hungary at the age of 18.

The order to pay compensation is over the player's sporting rights, which Porto maintained a share in even after his transfer.

Becks still hopeful

AFP, Bristol

Real Madrid midfielder and former England captain David Beckham insists he has not given up hope of convincing Steve McClaren to recall him to the national squad.

Speaking on a visit to a school in Bristol to launch a new website for schools, www.thedavidbeckhamacademy.co.uk, Beckham said: "I have always said I will be available for my country and that still stands."

"I'm not reconciled to not being part of the squad and it's always tough when it comes to international week and I'm not involved but there have been a few of those now so I'm becoming accustomed to spending time with the family or doing different things."

"I've never been a great spectator even when I was a young kid. I hated watching the games when I felt I could be playing. Of course I will watch the England games though - I'll sit and watch them with the family."

England play Israel on March 24 and then Andorra four days later in Group E Euro 2008 qualifiers.

A couple of poor performances could seriously jeopardise England's chance of reaching the finals next year in Austria and Switzerland.

Chelsea oust Spurs Horror at White Hart Lane

AFP, London



Frank Lampard revealed his horror at being attacked by a Tottenham fan as he celebrated Chelsea's 2-1 FA Cup quarterfinal replay win, thanks to Andriy Shevchenko who finally showed his true quality with a superb strike on Monday.

Lampard was savouring the triumph with his teammates in front of the Chelsea supporters at White Hart Lane when two Spurs ran onto the pitch to confront him.

One of them got close enough to throw a punch at Lampard, but he failed to make contact with the

England midfielder. Stewards eventually dragged the fans away as Blues boss Jose Mourinho and his coaching staff intervened.

Lampard, who had thrown his shirt to Chelsea's fans, insisted he was within his rights to celebrate and said: "I saw the guy coming and just ducked. He should never have been on pitch. There is a lot of emotion in this game, but we should be able to celebrate with our own fans."

"It's not fair. Their fans gave us stick for the whole game and then complain when we celebrate. The feeling had built up from the first game and that showed."

Mourinho warned Tottenham's security staff that they must be more alert in future to avoid a repeat. He said: "It could have been worse. With the last whistle maybe the security



PHOTO: AFP

Frank Lampard (L) and John Terry of Chelsea celebrate their 2-1 victory against Tottenham Hotspur in the FA Cup quarterfinal replay at White Hart Lane, London yesterday.

Rafa warns Eng



REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez says England will not develop international class players in future unless they allow top clubs to play reserve teams in lower divisions.

He believes England need to adopt the Spanish system where clubs like Real Madrid have second-ary sides playing professional football to help young players develop. Similar systems also work in Germany, France and other European countries.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho also called for the change last December saying then that the only way talented youngsters can get the competitive experience they need is by being loaned out to other clubs.

He said it would be far better if they played together as a team in one of the lower English divisions.

Mainly however, young players are forced to play in uncompetitive reserve fixtures.

Benitez said: "It is clear that the reserve league doesn't work. You can see youngsters playing just 18 games a season -- that is nothing. Certainly not enough for the development of these players."

"I do not see a reserve team with four or five senior players playing without passion as a useful exercise."

"Between the ages of 18 and 21, the players do not know what to do. If they are good enough at 18 they are with the first team but on the bench all the time."

"It is something that needs to change. I have been here three years and have talked to many people about this, and what I see is players who are 17 years old and cannot progress their careers."

Benitez has first hand experience of how players can develop faster by participating in competitive games.

"I was the manager of Castille, Real Madrid's reserve side, and I had players who were 18, 19 years old playing in the Spanish second division championship," he added.

"They were playing against men. They were winning and we finished sixth and fourth."

"I would like to see reserve teams of the big clubs like ourselves playing in the Football League. Why not if they have enough quality?"

In France, reserve teams play in the amateur fourth division (CFA) where they gain some competitive experience.

Nantes developed Marcel Desailly, Didier Deschamps and Christian Karembeu, all part of the 1998 World Cup winning squad, through their reserve team and have long been the best team in CFA.

McClaren calls up Nugent

AFP, London

Preston striker David Nugent on Monday was called into the England squad for their Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel and Andorra this week.

Coach Steve McClaren included Nugent in his 23-man squad after Darren Bent bowed out suffering from a prolonged knee injury.

And although Bent played over 80 minutes in Charlton's win against Newcastle on Sunday the striker has never fully recovered from the injury which has plagued the 23-year-old for the last couple of months.

The call up makes Nugent the only outfield player in McClaren's squad not to come from a top-flight league.

Charlton boss Alan Pardew did however give the thumbs up for Bent to report for training on Tuesday but McClaren has opted to make the change now, allowing Nugent to step up from Nigel Pearson's under-21 squad and play a full part in preparations for Saturday's crucial clash with Israel in Tel Aviv.

Despite being unproven at this level of the game, Nugent has impressed at his club notching up 16 goals in all competitions and has been a major factor behind his club's surge into a Championship play-off spot.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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EQQYFE "NHMFT ROBXRHM"? Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF YOU PERSUADE SOMEONE TO SHED A FEW EXTRA POUNDS, COULD THEY CLAIM IT WAS A DIET COAX? Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals O