

'66 hero Alan Ball dies



Football

AFP, London

Alan Ball, who teammates said was the hero of England's 1966 World Cup winning team, has died from a heart attack at the age of 61.

At 21, Ball was the youngest member of the England team that beat West Germany 4-2. His man-of-the-match effort typified his attitude in a football career that saw him play 975 first-team games over 21 years.

The England legend collapsed and died outside his home after attempting to fight a blaze that had got out of control, police said. His death was not being treated as suspicious.

Ball is the second member of the side to die. Captain Bobby Moore died of cancer in 1993.

Ball played 72 times for his country between 1965 and 1975, scoring eight goals and captaining the side six times.

The former Arsenal and Everton midfielder also forged a career in management, taking charge at Southampton, Manchester City and Portsmouth.

Ball's son Jimmy said his father had watched on television as Manchester United beat AC Milan 3-2 in Tuesday's Champions League semifinal first leg.

"I was talking to him last night just after the football and he was in great form. We were talking about (Paul) Scholes's pass," he said from his father's home.

"And then I got a phone call in the middle of the night. It's unbelievable and very, very sad."

He added: "I would like him to be known as a nice man with a passion for football. He had a big heart and was very generous."

Ball cut a distinctive with his diminutive stature, high-pitched voice and flame-red hair.

In the 1966 World Cup final, his cross set up striker Geoff Hurst's famously controversial goal that put England 3-2 ahead in extra time.

Hurst said fellow teammates were "all totally devastated" by Ball's death.

"He was the youngest member

of the team and man of the match in the 1966 World Cup final," said Hurst.

Born James Alan Ball on May 12, 1945 in Bolton, northwest England, he began his career with Blackpool, turning professional in May 1962 and making his league debut that year aged 17.

His tenacious performances caught the eye of England manager Alf Ramsey, who gave him his first cap in a 1-1 draw with Yugoslavia in Belgrade in May 1965.

He made it into Ramsey's World Cup squad and his heroics earned

him a 110,000-pound move to Everton in August 1966.

Ball made 208 league appearances for the Toffees, scoring 66 goals. Everton were 1968 FA Cup finalists and won the 1969-1970 English title.

Champions and FA Cup holders Arsenal bought him for 220,000 pounds in December 1971, but they lost their grip on both trophies, and Ball earned another FA Cup runners-up medal.

He played 177 league games for the Gunners, scoring 45 goals.

In 1973, he became only the

second player to be sent off in a full international, which meant he missed a crucial World Cup qualifier which England failed to win, keeping them out of the 1974 tournament.

Southampton manager Lawrie McMenemy signed Ball for 60,000 pounds in December 1976 and he helped them back into the top division in 1978. He earned a League Cup runners-up medal with the Saints in 1979.

He played for Philadelphia Fury and Vancouver Whitecaps before returning to Blackpool as a player-coach in 1980.

Ball then played for Southampton again, Hong Kong side Eastern Athletic before joining Bristol Rovers in 1983, where he finished his career, having played 975 competitive matches in total.

He took charge at Portsmouth in 1984 and guided them back into the top division in 1987, though they were relegated after one season and Ball was sacked.

He took over at Southampton in 1994 and kept them in the Premiership.

Ball then joined Manchester City in July 1995, but they were relegated from the top flight and he quit three games into the following season.

He returned to second-tier Portsmouth in February 1998 and hauled them out of the relegation zone that season.

However, his contract was terminated as the club fell into a financial crisis.

He and four others from the England's World Cup winning side were finally made members of the Order of the British Empire in 2000, given the MBE honour decades after their teammates, an anomaly which infuriated many England supporters.

To raise money for his family, Ball auctioned his World Cup winners' medal and commemorative tournament cap for 140,000 pounds in 2005, something many fans found tragically sad in an era of vaster player salaries.

McMenemy said the pair were due to play Wednesday in a heart charity golf event.



ALAN BALL

Barca to play in Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

Spanish league champions Barcelona will take on a Hong Kong invitational side in a friendly clash this summer, a spokeswoman for the promoters said Wednesday.

With a promise to field star players like Ronaldinho, the Spanish league-leaders will play a team drawn from two of Hong Kong's top sides, Kitchee and Happy Valley.

No date has been set for the match yet and organisers are awaiting its sanction from the Hong Kong Football Association.

Barcelona will come to Hong Kong as part of an Asian tour that so far will also include a match in Japan against a yet-to-be-decided side. They are also considering an invitation to play in China, the spokeswoman said.

Organisers wouldn't comment on reports in Britain that the Spanish giants would be paid the equivalent of 1.2 million pounds (2.4 million US dollars) to travel here.

Top-flight European clubs like Manchester United and Inter Milan have made lucrative off-season tours to football-mad Asia in the past few years.

Court throws out Galatasaray's Ribery claim

AFP, Lausanne

World sport's top court on Wednesday dismissed an appeal by Turkish club Galatasaray against French international Franck Ribery's move to Marseille in 2005.

The Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS) said in a statement that Ribery had terminated his contract with the Turkish club on just grounds, and that Galatasaray was not entitled to any compensation.

The 26-year-old midfielder had signed a three-and-a-half year deal with the Turkish side in January 2005 before signing up with Marseille just five months later.

Galatasaray had claimed that Ribery was at fault when he broke his contract having not been paid for over four months. The Istanbul side was reportedly claiming 10 million euros in compensation from Marseille.

The Turkish club appealed to CAS after football's world governing body FIFA dismissed their case last November.

Ribery, who has generated strong interest from Lyon, Real Madrid and Arsenal, is again under the transfer spotlight after Marseille president Paul Diouf signalled that he would let his star winger leave at the end of the season if he wants.



Football

AFP, The Hague

Dutch football legend Johan Cruyff celebrates his 60th birthday here on Wednesday where he is revered not only as the greatest player of all time but also as a cultural phenomenon who even has his own language: Cruyffian.

Comments like "coincidence is logical" and "you don't get it until you understand it" have earned the ex-player a cult status in the Netherlands.

Cruyff, born April 25, 1947, is even the subject of articles in the Dutch Onze Taal (Our Language) magazine.

"Cruyff the speaker slices and turns, accelerates and slows down in his language just as easily as he used to on the field," linguists Guus Middag and Kees van der Zwan wrote.

The triple European Footballer of the Year (1971, 1973 and 1974), and the European Footballer of the Century, is not just a famous ex-player but a football oracle in his own right whose opinions on the game are at once enormously insightful and startlingly simple.

His analysis are often rambling stream-of-consciousness remarks like "Italians cannot beat you but you can lose to them".

The Dutch love it. "It had the power of paradox that comes with an air of deeper

insight. It was slightly funny as with everything that could either be obvious or nonsense," the linguists said.

In the 1970s Cruyff symbolised the football revolution of the so-called total football -- a fluid team where every player can play from every position if necessary -- that the Dutch national team and his club Ajax made famous.

He won eight Dutch league titles with Ajax Amsterdam and three European Cups and reached the World Cup final in 1974 only to lose to the Netherlands' arch-rivals Germany.

He went on to a successful career with Barcelona where he was revered as El Salvador (the saviour).

Cruyff has always been an intelligent and strong-willed player.

Even when he was not yet a coach he was always advising the other players around him.

After his playing career ended he became a coach even though he initially lacked the necessary qualifications.

Eventually the Dutch football association (KNVB) grudgingly agreed to give him the status of coach without him having followed the required course.

After a successful run coaching Ajax and Barcelona Cruyff became a football analyst for Dutch public television.

It was there that his strange

use of language, coupled with his insights, propelled him to the status of resident oracle in the Netherlands.

His so-called Cruyffian language is very popular with his "every disadvantage has its advantage" becoming a modern catch phrase.

In a poll commissioned by Dutch news agency ANP for his 60th birthday that phrase was voted most popular ahead of other classics as "If we have the ball, they can't score" and "it doesn't matter if the opposing side scores a goal as long as you score one more than them".

In the ANP poll only 25 percent of the 1,200 people polled said they understood his insights. Fifty-three percent said they can't always follow his analysis but don't mind.

According to the book "Who is Johan Cruyff. Insiders explain the oracle" by Mik Schots and Jan Luitzen his biggest critic is his wife Danny.

She told the authors that when he comes home from his TV job she often tells him "explain that to me again because I don't understand what you meant".

The current Dutch national team coach Marco van Basten once said: "Johan drives me crazy because he always wants to be right".

"Then two months later he really drives me to insanity when it turns out he was right all along."

Health scare for Hitzfeld

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld revealed on Wednesday that the health problems which forced him to retire in 2004 have returned.

The 58-year-old was only persuaded back to Bayern's helm in February after Felix Magath was sacked, but the stress of coaching the German giants is taking its toll on his health once more and he has already lost two kilos.

Hitzfeld has agreed to coach Bayern next season, but is planning a major recruitment drive over the summer with his side set to miss out on a Champions League place next season for the first time in 11 years.

"I must make sure I don't lose too much weight and I have to make sure I find my time for switching off and relaxing," Hitzfeld told German sports magazine Sport-Bild in the wake of his side's 2-0 defeat at VfB Stuttgart last weekend.

"It's too easy to not be able to see the wood for the trees when the pressure of the job starts building up."

Although the stomach complaint which affected him in 2004 is showing signs of returning, the 2001 World Coach of the Year is managing his condition with relaxation.

"After spending the whole day dealing with football, I make sure I switch off after 8pm and do something completely different, read or just relax," he said.

But Hitzfeld stressed he is enjoying his time back with Bayern.

"I am proud to be Bayern coach. It is a lot of fun, even if it doesn't always seem so at the time."

Schalke snap up Jones

AFP, Berlin

Former Germany Under-21 international Jermaine Jones will join Schalke 04 at the end of the season, the Bundesliga leaders announced on Tuesday afternoon.

The 26-year-old Eintracht Frankfurt midfielder, who has missed most of the season with a knee injury, has signed a deal until 2011 and will replace Schalke's Bayern Munich-bound Turkish international Hamit Altintop.

"Schalke are a traditional club with big ambitions and are on the verge of winning the Bundesliga title," said Jones.

"They have got great facilities and are the sort of side any footballer would want to play for."

Schalke manager Andreas Mueller said the club are delighted to capture the flamboyant Jones, the son of a US soldier based in Germany, who has also spent a season at Bayer Leverkusen.

"Jermaine plays the kind of football which fits 100 percent into our style," said Mueller.

"He is an aggressive and dynamic player, our fans will be glad to have him here."

Schalke coach Mirko Slomka added: "Jermaine is superb in the middle of the park, he is the ideal replacement for Hamit Altintop."

"His strength and his athleticism make him a valuable asset." Schalke are two points clear at the top of the Bundesliga with four games to go.

Discovery suspend Basso

AFP, Paris

Italian cycling star Ivan Basso has been suspended by his team, Discovery Channel, as Italian authorities investigate his role in the 'Operation Puerto' doping affair in Spain.

Basso, who was suspended by his former team CSC due to his alleged role in the affair prior to last year's Tour de France, has the full support of Discovery but his future in the sport remains in doubt.

The Italian Olympic Committee's (CONI) asked Basso to appear before an anti-doping prosecutor on May 2, where he may be asked to provide a DNA sample to prove his innocence.

Basso was kicked off the Tour by CSC in 2006 after it was revealed that he was among dozens of cyclists to have links with Spanish doctor Eufemiano Fuentes.

Police uncovered bags of blood and doping products on a raid on Fuentes' laboratory in Madrid, along with codenames of cyclists and documents which suggested the doctor had been paid to manipulate and store blood.

The Italian authorities, including CONI, initially cleared Basso of any wrongdoing last autumn claiming there was not enough evidence to sanction the reigning Tour of Italy champion.

However their decision to act in the wake of a series of damaging revelations to have appeared in the Spanish press appears to leave Basso's future in limbo.

Bremen versus Spain

AFP, Paris



UEFA Cup semifinal first leg clash.

The German side are the only non-Spanish team in the last four - holders Sevilla take on Osasuna in the other semi -- but are in prime form as their 3-1 win in the league last Friday kept them within two points of leaders Schalke 04.

Werder's outstanding German international midfielder Torsten Frings believes that the 1992 Cup Winners Cup winners are capable of beating anyone, and certainly the manner in which they demolished Dutch league leaders AZ Alkmaar in the quarterfinals lends his theory credence.

"We can beat any club in Europe," Frings told uefa.com.

"We can win this tournament," the 30-year-old added with typical German candour.

Bremen could be boosted by the return of defender Christian Schulz, who has recovered from a thigh injury but will be without long-time injury absentee, Cameroon international Pierre Wome.

Also facing watching from the sidelines could be Tim Borowski, who was outstanding on his return

to the side in the second leg against Alkmaar, and Per Mertesacker.

However while Frings, who was much missed by Germany in their World Cup semifinal against Italy last year because he was suspended after a fracas at the end of their quarterfinal with Argentina, is confident the club's sporting director Klaus Allofs was taking a more circumspect tone.

"I think Espanyol will be tougher than Celta Vigo," said the former German international striker, referring to the Spanish side they eliminated from the round of 16.

Certainly Espanyol, finalists in 1988 when they were beaten by Bayer Leverkusen, have caused a storm in the UEFA Cup this season being the leading scorers in the competition -- striking home 27 goals -- with Walter Pandiani the individual leading scorer with 10 goals.

Bremen have their own ace marksman in Miroslav Klose and the Polish-born German international showed a return to form in the second leg win over Alkmaar when he scored twice to end a long running goal drought.

Allied to the silky playmaking skills of 22-year-old Brazilian playmaker Diego -- who scored against Alkmaar and surpassed that with a 60 metres effort against Alemannia Aachen last Friday -- Bremen travel to Barcelona in justifiably confident mood.

Sevilla's bid to become only the second side to retain the trophy -- Real Madrid are the only side to have accomplished that

Milan warn MU

AFP, Manchester



AC Milan hardman Gennaro Gattuso has warned Manchester United to steel themselves for an almighty

half hour and I also felt my own performance dip," the Brazilian said.

"But we can take a lot of encouragement from our performance, and that will fire us up for the second leg."

The devout Christian added: "I have faith in my team and I feel we



PHOTO: AFP

Milan midfielder Kaka (R) and Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs settle a dispute during their Champions League semifinal at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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