



AC Milan's Brazilian midfielder Kaka (C) is ecstatic as dejected Liverpool players walk off at the end of the Champions League final at the Olympic Stadium in Athens on Wednesday.

Real to sue Le Monde

AFP, Madrid

Spanish football giants Real Madrid said on Wednesday they would be suing French daily newspaper Le Monde for publishing information linking them to Spanish doctor Eufemiano Fuentes who allegedly ran a blood-doping network involving various sports.

'Operation Puerto' was the name given to a raid on the premises of Fuentes in May 2006. Madrid police uncovered bags of blood and doping products, along with codenames of cyclists and documents which pointed to organised doping.

Real Madrid spokesman Miguel Angel Arroyo said at a press conference the legal proceedings would be set in motion formally at a Madrid court on Thursday.

Arroyo said Le Monde "published quotes which were attributed to Dr Eufemiano Fuentes, who later denied them, and therefore the final responsibility lay with the media which used them and the journalist who published them."

Le Monde claimed in its December 8 edition last year that four Spanish clubs, including Barcelona and Madrid, were linked with the blood-doping scandal. The clubs vehemently denied the allegations.

Man Utd dump Malaysia match



AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Premier League champions Manchester United Thursday bowed to pressure from the Asian Football Confederation and called off their planned match in Malaysia in July.

The decision followed talks here Wednesday between AFC president Mohamed bin Hammam, Premier League chairman Sir Dave Richards and Manchester United chief executive David Gill.

"This match is a key element of the Malaysian government's celebrations of its 50 years of independence and presents a marvellous opportunity for us to play in front of our many Malaysian fans," United said in a statement.

"Unfortunately, new information has come to the club's attention concerning the FAM's (Football Association of Malaysia's) agreement with the AFC to act as host for the Asian Cup, which means the club cannot play the game without the official approval of the AFC."

United said the only way the match could go ahead was if the AFC changed its mind.

An AFC official Thursday told AFP its position remained unchanged -- that the match cannot take place while the Asian Cup is on from July 7-29.

All four Asian Cup host nations -- Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam -- made pledges to the AFC

that they would not hold or promote any other football matches during the flagship tournament.

Bin Hammam has warned the FAM it faces "wide-ranging legal repercussions" for failing to toe the AFC line, although he has not made clear what they might be.

His fear is that a club of United's magnitude would draw attention away from the region's most prestigious football tournament, held every four years.

However, the rest of United's Asia tour to South Korea, Japan and Macau is set to go ahead despite AFC calls for it to be postponed.

The Malaysian climbdown, though, is a victory for the AFC, which had the backing of FIFA president Sepp Blatter, and a slap in the face for the FAM and the government, which invited United as part of their independence celebrations.

"We are sad if they are not coming," Malaysian Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Mansor told AFP.

"We have already spoken to the AFC a couple of times, but the trouble with the AFC is that they are not compromising. The final is not even played in Malaysia so I am confused and upset."

The minister added that the government was attempting to reach the club and talk to them.

"We've got to find out why they are not coming. I have not spoken to them. As far as the government is concerned, we want them to come."

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi earlier this month called for the match to go ahead. His son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, an influential political leader, Thursday urged the AFC to reconsider.

"If Hammam is unwilling to agree to this request, it will be a tremendous insult to the government of Malaysia which houses the AFC headquarters and has been a strong supporter of AFC and Asian football in general," Khairy told the state Bernama news agency.

FAM deputy president Tengku Abdullah said the body had attempted to reach an amicable solution.

"In fact, I requested that United come two days later but they said it's not possible," he was quoted as saying by the New Straits Times.

"There is nothing much we can do at this point in time."

United have fixed a friendly against Inter Milan at Old Trafford on August 1 and are unable to reschedule the match for after the Asian Cup. They then take on Chelsea in the season-opening Community Shield on August 5.

They now kick off their pre-season commercial tour against J-League champions Urawa Red Diamonds on July 17 before a showdown with FC Seoul on July 20. The team then travel to Macau for a match against Shenzhen on July 23.

Owen back at int'l stage



AFP, Burnley

With three World Cups behind him and 36 international goals to his name, Michael Owen may have felt that his days of proving himself in an England shirt were nothing but a distant memory.

Yet when England's B team lines up against Albania at Burnley's Turf Moor on Friday, the Newcastle United forward will be aiming to show once and for all that he is fit, ready to reclaim his billing as one of the world's deadliest strikers and finally ready to emerge from an 18-month injury nightmare.

A broken metatarsal suffered against Tottenham Hotspur on New Year's Eve 2005 sidelined the former Liverpool and Real Madrid star for almost five months and cast a huge question mark over his chances of making Sven-Goran Eriksson's England squad for the World Cup.

But having overcome that major setback to win a place on the plane to Germany, Owen's career lay in ruins again by the end of the group stage as a result of the cruciate ligament injury suffered in the 2-2 draw with Sweden in Cologne.

It was a serious injury, one that had many fearing for Owen's long-term future in the game and the 26-year-old spent over nine months on the sidelines before making his Newcastle comeback in the Premiership clash against Reading on April 30.

With England struggling to make headway in their Euro 2008 qualifying group, though, head coach Steve McClaren admits that Owen's return to fitness is a major boost -- despite insisting that the striker will need time to readjust to the international game.

McClaren said: "I think the likes

of Michael Owen will be like a new signing because he has proved over the years that he scores vital goals.

"He scores goals out of nothing, he scores goals when the team is probably not playing well and every successful team needs a goalscorer like that.

"I don't think anybody expects a lot from him, though. It's just great to have him back, involved and playing.

"But let's give him time and let's be patient because the majority of the time it does take a while to get your timing back, to get the runs back. Looking at Michael, though, he looks very fit and very sharp.

"His return from injury is obviously a massive boost, though. It's almost a year since he picked up the injury in Germany and any side at international level would miss a player with Michael's goalscoring pedigree."

McClaren is set to use the friendly clash against Albania's senior team as an opportunity to test out up-and-coming players that have impressed in the Premiership this season such as Blackburn's David Bentley, Sheffield United's Phil Jagielka and Everton defender Joleon Lescott.

The Preston North End striker David Nugent is also in the squad after netting on his senior debut against Andorra in March and McClaren admits that the game gives the fringe players a chance to force their way into his plans for the June 1 friendly against Brazil and the Euro 2008 clash against Estonia in Tallinn on June 6.

He said: "The B game will provide a good opportunity for a lot of players. It's the first time I've called up David Bentley, Joleon Lescott, Nicky Shorey and Phil Jagielka, and they have earned the call. They have all played very well for their clubs this season."

Ballack opts out of Euro squad

AFP, Berlin

Germany's captain Michael Ballack will miss next week's Euro 2008 qualifiers against San Marino and Slovakia after failing to recover from an ankle injury, it was revealed on Thursday.

The 30-year-old, who has won 77 caps for his country, was injured playing for English FA Cup winners Chelsea in a Premier League game against Newcastle United on April 22.

He immediately flew to Munich to have a piece of bone removed, but last month's operation did not go down well with Chelsea as Ballack was forced to miss his club's FA Cup final and Champions League semi-final ties.

But after several weeks of treatment, the midfielder finally threw in the towel on his chances of playing against San Marino in Nuremberg on June 2 and Solvki in Hamburg on June 6.

Ballack told national coach Joachim Loew on Thursday that he was withdrawing from the squad.

Germany are top of Group D with a game in hand over the second-placed Czech Republic and two games in hand over the third-placed Republic of Ireland.

Hamilton plays down pre-Monaco hype



AFP, Monte Carlo

Lewis Hamilton, the 22-year-old British rookie who is leading this year's Formula One drivers' world championship, has played down his chances of grabbing a maiden victory in Sunday's Monaco Grand Prix.

Hamilton, who has reeled off a record-breaking run of four podium finishes in his first four races in F1, did his utmost to quell high hopes among his and the McLaren Mercedes-Benz team's followers that he is set for more glory.

The young racing ace, who has won all three of his previous racing appearances on the famous old Mediterranean street circuit in the Formula Three and GP2 series, has stressed that it is important to remain realistic -- and remember how little experience he has of driving an F1 car.

But his pleas for realism, it seemed, had fallen on deaf ears to judge by the enthusiasm to back him generated by his fans and followers in and around the paddock.

The Hamilton story, so heavily-hyped, but backed by an astonishing run of results that have installed him as the youngest leader in F1 history, looks like it has a long way to go.

Hamilton is a well-known success story as a scrapper on street circuits and his triumph in a fabulous GP2 race in the Mediterranean principality last year added to his two Formula Three victories in 2005.

"I am really looking forward to this race. I always run well here," said Hamilton.

"It is one of the tracks I have

always dreamed of racing at in F1, particularly having competed there for the past two seasons in the F3 Euroseries and GP2.

"For me it is the best circuit of the year. There is nowhere like it for getting the adrenaline going. I am going to the race again this year with the intention of fighting for the win, but that is the case at everything I compete in.

"However we do have to keep being realistic, this will be my fifth race in Formula One and I am still developing. We have to focus on keeping scoring points for both the constructors' and drivers' championships and take it step by step."

As Hamilton was mobbed by fans, reporters and admirers, his McLaren team-mate, defending double world champion Fernando Alonso of Spain, was able to keep out of the limelight.

Alonso, who won at Monaco for Renault last year, is two points behind Hamilton in the world championship and determined not to be upstaged by the sport's new youngster.

Alonso has been struggling to adapt to the Bridgestone tyres all the teams are using this year following the withdrawal of Michelin.

"I took the victory at the Grand Prix last year and, although it was an emotional weekend, it was an amazing feeling, one that I will race hard to try and repeat again this season," said Alonso.

"I have not had the results I have wanted at the previous two races, but I have kept scoring good points and we have continued to develop the performance of the car.

"At Monaco you have to really keep your concentration at all times and push to the limit. It is very easy for things to go wrong at this track because it is very narrow and the barriers are very close, and this is why you have to stay focused.

"Because of the barriers and the need to be very accurate, you do have to use a slightly different

driving style here to perform well over the weekend. You tend to be less aggressive in the braking zones.

"You also need to set the car up with a responsive front, so that you can be on the throttle as early as possible in the middle section of the corner without waiting for the car to turn, it is ways like this that you can find the milliseconds that you need at Monaco."

McLaren's chief rivals are likely to be Ferrari's Felipe Massa and Kimi Raikkonen, who between them have won three of the season's four races. Brazilian Massa has won the last two races and is just a point behind Alonso in third place.

Massa believes new tyre and safety car rules, allied to unpredictable weather, could make this weekend's race more of a lottery than usual.

"I have seen the weather forecast for the weekend and unbelievably, they say there is a chance of rain," said Massa.

"Believe it or not, if it does rain, it will be a completely new experience for me, as I have never driven this track in the wet. But when it rains, it rains on everyone!"

"Monaco is the sort of track where it is just not permitted to make a mistake and rain always increases the possibility of a mistake. It could make things even more of a lottery than usual, as will the new rules regarding having to use both types of tyre.

"If there is a safety car period, depending on what tyre you are on, it will either help you or go against you. But in a lottery, it is also important to have a bit of luck, so hopefully everything will work out for us this weekend."

Massa's best result at Monaco has been a fifth, but he is more confident of a good result this year after winning in Bahrain and Spain. "Let's just see how we go," he smiled.

14x3

Robben could still be Bayern's

AFP, Berlin

The agent and father of Chelsea forward Arjen Robben has rekindled hopes of the Dutch international moving to German giants Bayern Munich by saying "anything is possible" on Thursday.

Hans Robben insists his son, who has two years left on his contract, and English giants Chelsea have yet to decide on his future and there is still a chance Arjen will come to Bayern this summer.

"There is still the possibility that Arjen comes to Munich", said Robben senior in German sports magazine Kicker, "provided Bayern can offer us a five year contract."

But the 23-year-old Dutchman international said at the start of the week he wanted to stay at Chelsea, even if he seems to have lost favour with Chelsea's manager Jose Mourinho.

"I've always said I want to stay. I will be here next season, that's for sure," Robben was reported to have said only on Monday after playing a brief role in last Saturday's FA Cup final 1-0 win over Manchester United.

Since his 2004 arrival at Chelsea from PSV Eindhoven, Robben has played 51 Premier League matches in three seasons, scoring 16 goals, but has often been injured.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 More than 50 percent

5 Spigot

8 Use an old telephone

12 Eastern potentale

13 Flying Down to --

14 Green-eyed monster

15 Cleo's water

16 Apr. addressee

17 Commotion

18 Unimprovable place

20 Rob

22 Massachusets cape

23 Work unit

24 Anthropologist Fossey

27 Accumulated

32 Lubricant

33 Whopper

34 Whatever amount

35 Last name of the Menace

38 Sheltered

39 Inventor

40 Where "Lost" is found

42 Seafood option

45 Computer whiz

49 Secular gift

50 Wahine's water

52 Modern-day money

53 Piglet's comment

54 "To thine self be true"

55 Blueprint

56 Ova

57 Cribbage scorer

58 Brown shades

DOWN

1 Walter's handout

2 Leave out

3 Grain

4 Heavy boring tool

5 Romantic problem

6 Melody

7 NYC news-paper

8 Want

9 Essential (to)

10 Tail -- true?

11 Muse's music maker

19 Stylish

21 Coop

22 Denizen

24 Comical Deloise

25 Midafternoon hour (Rom.)

26 Tailor's task

28 Have a bug

29 Telling a story

30 Away from WSW

31 Turn red?

36 Succeeds

37 That guy

38 Take

41 Exist

42 -- gin fizz

43 Secretary of state under Reagan

44 Beanbag chair

46 Shake in the grass?

47 Persia, now

48 Billions of years

51 Ram's name

Solution time: 25 mins.

GRAPE ADO GUSP  
NULE PEA ANTI  
DUE HILL BLA  
STAIR STAIRS  
BEAM WORK  
OPUS KULO ERA  
RIG FINE LOW  
BET UNIT BYTE  
TICE GEAR  
REMOLO GUEST  
AIZED HUGA TINT  
WILE SUE SOAP  
STYX TNT ELMO

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CRYPTOQUIP

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UGGPKCRW, ORL RIRLLCZ  
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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: OFF-CAMERA THE  
ACTOR IS A SPITEFUL, HOT-TEMPERED PERSON,  
BUT HE'S NOT THAT BAD IN REEL LIFE.  
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals O