



Bayern Munich manager Uli Hoeneß (R) presents their two newest acquisitions French midfielder Franck Ribéry (C) and Italian striker Luca Toni at a press conference in Munich on Thursday.

Bayern pull off double coup

Football

AFP, Munich

French midfielder Franck Ribéry and Italian striker Luca Toni insisted on Friday they have joined Bundesliga giants Bayern Munich to win titles and get them back to the pinnacle of German football.

Ribéry, 24, signed for Bayern on Thursday from French side Marseille, less than 24 hours after masterminding France's 1-0 Euro 2008 qualifier win over Georgia in Paris on Wednesday night, and 30-year-old World Cup winner Toni joined from Fiorentina.

Since German captain Michael Ballack moved to Chelsea last summer, Bayern struggled in midfield last season, enduring their worst season for ten years, and as one of the world's best attacking midfielders, Ribéry will fill the role.

The Frenchman is looking forward to bringing some glory back to his new club having signed a four-year deal with the German giants.

"Bayern are an ambitious, serious and a very well-structured club

whose senior figures made a lot of effort to recruit me," said Ribéry, whose transfer is estimated to be 25 million euros, which would make him the most expensive player in Bayern's history.

"In the last year I have competed in some big finals - the World Cup final, the French Cup final - and lost them. But I have come here to earn titles, because that is what means something in every player's career."

Having finished fourth in the Bundesliga last season, Bayern will be in the UEFA Cup next season for the first time in ten years and Ribéry revealed he turned down Real Madrid - and the Champions League - to come to Bayern.

"Real Madrid wanted me to join," said Ribéry.

"It certainly gave me food for thought, especially as Bayern won't play in the Champions League next season."

"But when a big club like Bayern comes to see you, it is really something. They had a difficult season, but this club have often been champions."

"The most important thing is that they will bounce back and the club

have made a huge effort to recruit big players."

And Toni, who won the European Golden Boot in the 2005-06 season after scoring 31 goals for Fiorentina, echoed Ribéry's sentiments - he has come to Bayern to bring back the glory and win titles.

"Bayern is one of the most famous teams in the world and their directors made it clear they wanted me as part of their plans for next season," said Toni, whose transfer deal is believed to be worth 11 million euro.

"I wanted a new challenge and to get some experience outside Italy."

"Bayern is a club which has plans for a big future and that is what attracted me."

"It's true they won't play in the Champions League next season, but they clearly have ambition to get back their glory days and we will start with the Bundesliga and UEFA Cup next season."

Ribéry added Bayern's French defender Willy Sagnol had been a big factor in helping lure him to Munich and the pair had discussions during last year's World Cup finals in Germany about a possible switch.

"During the World Cup, we spoke

a lot about Bayern and he only told me good things," said Ribéry.

"When I told him I was coming, he told me I had made the right choice."

"Bayern are a serious club and I got the support from several players in the French team, as well as the coach Raymond Domenech."

"He did not hesitate and said to me I would do well there."

"I am looking forward to playing in the Bundesliga, where there are a lot of personal duels and midfield battles."

Toni and Ribéry join striker Jan Schlaudraff, midfielders Hamit Altintop and Ernesto Sosa and defender Marcell Jansen as confirmed new arrivals at Bayern this summer.

Brazilian winger Zé Roberto is set to agree a return, while German striker Miroslav Klose has confirmed his intention to join them from Werder Bremen by the summer of 2008 at the latest.

Real lead at home stretch

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid could notch up their 30th Spanish title if they win at Real Zaragoza on Saturday and their rivals Barcelona and Sevilla lose at home to Espanyol and away at Real Mallorca respectively.

However, Spanish pundits put Real's chances of clinching the championship with a week in hand as little better than 10 to one especially as fifth-placed Zaragoza are not going to let Madrid win La Liga without a massive fight.

At stake for Zaragoza is their

intimidating La Romareda stadium is a place in the UEFA Cup.

"I think we have got a good chance to beat Real Madrid. It will be a good way to say goodbye to our fans for this season," said Zaragoza's Argentine playmaker Pablo Aimar on Thursday.

"We beat Barcelona at home not so long ago and we need to play the same way if we are to beat Real but I think we are up to it."

Zaragoza will be without their

suspended Uruguayan defender Carlos Diogo, who has been on a season-long loan from Real Madrid and whose permanent transfer was sealed on Wednesday.

David Beckham could also miss the crucial match after returning to Madrid following England's 3-0 win in Estonia on Wednesday, with a slightly sprained left ankle.

"He's not definitely out at this stage but he's doubtful," said a Real club spokesman on Thursday.

Beckham also missed Real's 1-0 home win against Zaragoza when he was dropped for a month by Fabio Capello in January as a punishment for signing for American side LA Galaxy.

The goalscorer that night was Ruud van Nistelrooy. With 24 league goals so far this season the Dutchman is looking to clinch La Liga's top scorer plaudits in Real's final two games, and also grab the European Golden Boot award from under the nose of Roma's Francesco Totti, who scored 26 goals in Italy's Serie A this season.

Second-placed Barcelona have,

like Real, 72 points from their 36 games but the reigning champions are behind their bitter rivals as a result of this season's head-to-head encounters.

"Real have a very difficult away game so they could slip up but a derby game always means Espanyol are more motivated than normal," said Barcelona's Portuguese winger Deco on Thursday.

Barca have their Brazilian pair Ronaldinho and Edmílson suspended while Espanyol's Moroccan international midfielder Moha El Yaagoubi also has a one match ban.

Sevilla are two points behind the leading pair but, after being on top at the start of the year, last month's UEFA Cup winners are now likely to be settling for a place in next season's Champions League.

At the other end of the table, both Real Sociedad and Celta Vigo are playing for their top flight survival and will be relegated if they lose on Saturday.

Both teams were in the Champions League as recently as three seasons ago but have endured lacklustre campaigns.

The San Sebastian-based Real Sociedad were last in the Spanish second division 40 years ago, in 1967, but their failure to find the net, rather than problems at the back, has been the source of their woes this season.

Former Brazilian international

Savio arrived mid-season and the dynamic midfielder, who won three Champions Leagues with Real Madrid, has helped restore a modicum of pride to Sociedad but it is an indication of their plight that he is their leading scorer with five goals.

Sociedad will probably delay relegation, if only for a week, if they beat Racing Santander, who have nothing left to play for, but fellow strugglers Celta have a much tougher task at Atletico Madrid.

Atletico lie sixth and are bidding to return to Europe for the first time since the 1999-2000 season.

FIXTURES

Saturday
(kick off 1900GMT)
Atletico Madrid v Celta Vigo, Barcelona v Espanyol, Real Betis v Osasuna, Levante v Valencia, Real Mallorca v Sevilla, Real Sociedad v Racing Santander, Villarreal v Athletic Bilbao, Real Zaragoza v Real Madrid
Sunday
(kick off 1500GMT)
Deportivo La Coruna v Recreativo Huelva, Getafe v Gimnastic Tarragona



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's Brazilian contingent (from L-R) Emerson, Robinho, Roberto Carlos and Cicinho share a light moment during training session in Madrid on Thursday.

Newcastle rope in Viduka

Football

AFP, London

Premiership football and a natural goalscorer.

"He has the size and stature to lead our front line and is direct competition for Shola Ameobi, who is fit again now."

"It is common knowledge that every manager in the game wants two players for every position, and that is what we will have at Newcastle United next season as far as our strikers are concerned."

"It is a great start for us as we already have Oba Martins and Michael Owen who can play off a big man. It's all looking very exciting."

Boro boss Gareth Southgate said he was disappointed to see Viduka leave the Teesside club.

"It is a regret for me, but we did everything we could as a club to try and keep him," he said.

"The fact that he was in the latter months of his contract was difficult. It meant he was able to speak to other people, but there was nothing more from that period on that we could have done."

Premiership sides Portsmouth, West Ham and Birmingham were also linked to the Australian.

Viduka was signed by Middlesbrough from Leeds in July 2004. He scored 19 goals for Boro in the 2006-2007 campaign.

Govou blasts Juninho

AFP, Lyon

France striker Sidney Govou on Thursday launched a scathing attack on his Brazilian teammate Juninho, accusing him of being egotistical.

Despite Lyon coasting to a record sixth French title in a row last season, Govou claimed in an interview in the monthly Lyon Mag that the club's form dipped in the second half of the season due to deteriorating morale.

"The club had difficulties managing the egos. There were many relationship problems in the team," he said. "The worst was concerning Juninho."

"From the beginning of the season Gerard Houllier (the coach) and Jean-Michel Aulas (the president) decided to proclaim Juninho as the star of the team. Personally I didn't care but that posed many problems for some of the team's main players."

Govou, who is one of Lyon's highest earners despite scoring a solitary league goal last season, slammed the preferential treatment handed out to Juninho.

"In the end we understood that there was him and the rest. That ended up damaging what had made Lyon strong over so many years: group unity."

"Throughout the years we built up a family at Lyon but this last season was no longer the case. There were more egos. And a large part of the problem was Juninho."

Picturesque Euro preview

AFP, Geneva



Joint hosts Switzerland and Austria mark a year to go for the Euro 2008 finals on Friday with a mountain top match in the Swiss Alps involving some of their footballing greats and ex-European stars.

Ex-Swiss striker Stephane Chapuisat and Austria's Andreas Herzog led the two teams including Arsenal's Swiss defender Johann Djourou, ex-internationals Jerzy Dudek of Poland, Dane Michael Laudrup and Portugal's Paulo Sousa onto the artificial pitch on the 3,454 metre Jungfraujoch.

"The location is an outstanding representation of both host countries with the stunning Alpine backdrop," said Austrian FA chief Friedrich Stickler.

The symbolic ten minute game in the rarified atmosphere kicked off a series of events that are meant to drum up the only thing that appears to be missing in preparations: local enthusiasm.

"It would be a mistake for anyone to expect to see unbridled euphoria at this point for a tournament that takes place next year," the tournament director for Switzerland, Christian Mutschler, explained.

"But the enormous demand for tickets in the first phase of sales showed us quite clearly that there is a lot of interest out there," he added on UEFA's website, promising "excitement at the right time."

The initial batch of 346,000 tickets was allocated by lottery to fans worldwide in April after sales were hugely oversubscribed, led by Swiss applicants buoyed by the home side's international revival in recent years.

Countdown clocks, the first visual sign of Euro 2008's arrival, were inaugurated in six of the eight host cities on Thursday, 366 days before the opening match in Basel on June 7, 2008.

Seventeen Swiss towns and cities have agreed to host arenas with live match broadcasts on giant screens for several thousand ticketless fans each, sponsors announced.

Apart from a squabble between

UEFA and Swiss regions over players' taxes, stadiums, transport, and financial backing all appear to be slotting into place.

Venues in the Swiss city of Zurich and Klagenfurt in Austria are behind their original schedule but are due to be opened for the new season in September, while the other stadia are already in use except for a few upgrades.

Meanwhile, transport plans

agreed recently grant 36 hours free rail, bus and ferry travel in Austria and Switzerland for ticket holders during each match next year.

Security plans are due to be finalised after the match draw in December, once the Swiss and Austrians know where the fans from the 14 other nations will be heading.



PHOTO: AFP

UEFA gives Sweden win

AFP, Paris



Sweden were awarded a 3-0 victory over Denmark by European football's governing body UEFA on Friday for their Euro 2008 qualifier last weekend.

The damage is currently being repaired by the FA's specialist silversmiths in Birmingham. But the club have still been charging fans £20 a go to have their photo taken with the historic piece of silverware.

A club spokesperson confirmed last night: "The lid of the FA Cup was broken accidentally during celebrations and is being fixed to prevent further damage."

Fans were staggered this week when the Cup's top fell off when they had souvenir pictures taken in the club museum at Stamford Bridge.

The photographer just perched it back on to the lid and carried on.

When SunSport went to investigate the next day, the trophy was still on show alongside the Carling Cup. But there was no sign of the lid, which was en route to Birmingham for intricate welding.

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