

Figó to stay with Inter

AFP, Rome

Portuguese star Luis Figó has decided to stay with Inter Milan for another season, the Italian Serie A champions confirmed on Monday.

A statement on Inter's website said the 34-year-old forward will soon sign a one-year contract extension that will keep him at the club until June 2008.

Inter said the former Portugal international, European Footballer of the Year in 2000 and World Footballer of the Year in 2001, will then take up a position at the club as their international relations manager.

Figó, who joined Inter in 2005 after five years in Spain with Real Madrid, was close to moving to Saudi club Al Ittihad during the January transfer window but the switch fell through.

Figó, who retired from international football after Portugal were beaten by France in the semifinals of last year's World Cup in Germany, has scored eight goals in 92 matches for Inter.

Betis sack Luis Fernandez

AFP, Seville

Struggling Real Betis have sacked their coach Luis Fernandez, the club announced after an emergency directors' meeting on Sunday.

The Spanish-born former French international was dismissed after Betis crashed 5-0 at home to Osasuna on Saturday, a result that means they could still be relegated.

Fernandez, who had previously coached Spanish clubs Athletic Bilbao and Espanyol as well as Paris St Germain, was appointed coach at the end of December 2006.

He replaced former incumbent Javier Irureta with a brief of saving the Seville-based club from relegation.

Initially, things went well for Fernandez.

He steered Betis out of the bottom three with a string of good results, which included a 0-0 draw at league leaders and title favourites Real Madrid.

However, Betis have not won since the start of March.

Betis, who played in last season's Champions League, are now two places and one point above the relegation zone and have not won in their last 12 league outings.

It could still be lucky 13 for Betis as a win at Racing Santander next Sunday will ensure their survival.

Saturday's dismal display provoked violent protests.

With 10 minutes to go and 4-0 down, hundreds of Betis supporters swarmed onto the pitch at the Ruiz de Lopera stadium.

Police dispersed the pitch invasion but, after the match, more supporters tried to storm the directors' box.

Outside the stadium after the game, approximately five hundred Betis supporters had a pitched battle with the police, who discharged baton rounds in response to being pelted with bottles, stones and other objects.

No details were given by police of whether there were any arrests.

Spanish media reports on Sunday said that Fernandez will be replaced for their final game of the season by reserve team coach Paco Chaparro.

Price set for Quagliarella

AFP, Rome

Serie A outfits Sampdoria and Udinese, who jointly own rising star Fabio Quagliarella, have put a price tag on the attacking midfielder who is reported to be a target for many clubs this summer.

Quagliarella, 23, scored 13 goals for Sampdoria in Serie A this season and netted both of Italy's goals in their 2-0 win at Lithuania last week in his first start for the Azzurri.

Sampdoria director Beppe Marotta made his valuation of Quagliarella by comparing the fee AC Milan paid Parma for Alberto Gilardino two years ago.

"Taking into account that 24 million euros (32 million dollars) was paid for Gilardino, then I would say that the valuation for Quagliarella would be between 15 and 20 million euros (20 and 27 million dollars)," Marotta said.

"I am tremendously pleased for the boy for his performance for Italy, and obviously his goals have bumped up his value on the transfer market."

"I admit there are many clubs interested in buying him, but we would like him to stay with us for another season."

"However, he is also owned by Udinese, and any decision about his future will be taken together with them."

Udinese owner Giampaolo Pozzo valued Quagliarella at a slightly higher price than Marotta.

"He's worth at least 20 million euros (27 million dollars)," Pozzo said.

"For his age, and for what he has shown he can do, he's a very important player."



PHOTO: AFP

McLaren Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton of Britain holds the winners trophy as he celebrates winning the Montreal Grand Prix on Sunday, the first win of his Formula One career.

Hand of God falls short for Barca

TIMES ONLINE



Barcelona have been stumbling all season and in the end not even the Hand of God could save them from the inevitable fall. In the 90th minute, with a third consecutive league title all but in their grasp, Espanyol, their cross-town rivals, equalised, while at almost the same instant Ruud van Nistelrooy scored the goal that could bring Real Madrid the title and their first trophy in four seasons.

Saturday evening's match was billed as a 'radio game' because, with the Real Zaragoza-Madrid match kicking off at the same time, the crowd were as interested in the commentary from La Romareda as they were in the action at the Nou Camp.

It is symptomatic of Barcelona fans' obsession with Madrid that news of Zaragoza's goals got as big if not a bigger cheer as those scored by their own team. But in the end there was nothing to cheer about. La Vanguardia, the Barcelona daily,

headlined their match report "Another useless exhibition match" as, since Christmas, Barcelona have displayed all the football arts except that of holding on to a lead, while Madrid, not so pretty to watch, have excelled in the art of la remontada coming from behind.

Exhibit A on Saturday was Lionel Messi, who scored both Barcelona goals. He seems to have taken to heart the role as "the new Maradona", his mentor and hero. Earlier this season he produced a near-perfect copy of Diego Maradona's legendary slalom goal against England in the 1986 World Cup finals. Against Espanyol he reproduced Maradona's notorious "Hand of God" (also against England in 1986) when he appeared to head home the first-half equaliser, but in fact palmed it in with his left hand.

Asked about the goal later, the 20-year-old Argentina star said he only regretted that "in the end it gained us nothing more than a point". He denied that he set out to emulate his hero, saying: "Diego is a unique player, there will never be another like him."

Barcelona, without Ronaldinho, who was serving a one-match ban,

controlled the match, with Deco and Xavi commanding the midfield, but as so often this season, they never looked capable of putting the match beyond the reach of their rivals. Xavi said later that the match "sums up our season". Ironically, while Barcelona had to bank on the talents of an Argentinian, it was a Catalan, Raúl Tamudo, who shattered their dreams. His two goals for Espanyol make him the club's all-time leading scorer.

Everything hinges on the last match day of the season, when Madrid face Real Mallorca and Barcelona take on relegated Gimnastic. If both contenders win, the league will go to Madrid because they have a better record this season in head-to-head meetings. The outside bet is that Madrid and Barcelona both lose, Seville win and snatch the title by a point.

With so much at stake, it can only be a matter of a day or two before rumours surface of the maletón (briefcase), the term given by conspiracy theorists to the practice of offering money to teams who have nothing to play for in exchange for throwing a game.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi scores a goal with his hand in their derby encounter against Espanyol at the Nou Camp on Saturday.

Federer pulls out of Gerry Weber

AFP, Halle

World number one Roger Federer has announced that he will not be defending his title in the Halle ATP tournament which starts here on Monday.

The four-time defending champion had been expected to travel to Germany following his loss at the French Open final in Paris on Sunday when Spaniard Rafael Nadal destroyed the Swiss player's historic Grand Slam dream for another year by beating him 6-3, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4.

It also shattered Federer's hopes of capturing a first French Open and become only the third man after Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962 and 1969) to hold all four Grand Slam crowns at the same time.

But in a message posted on his website, Federer said: "In an attempt to prevent injury after the long final in Paris, I cannot defend my title at the Gerry Weber Open in Halle."

"Gerry and Ralf Weber have always been so hospitable over the years and I love playing there. I look forward to returning in 2008."

Last year, Federer clinched an epic 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (13/11), 7-6 (7/5) victory and went on to win his fourth crown in Halle.

Federer has in the past used the Halle tournament to warm-up on grass for Wimbledon, which starts this year on June 25.

Borowski hints at Klose exit

AFP, Bremen

German midfielder Tim Borowski on Monday became the latest Werder Bremen player to suggest Miroslav Klose's future lies elsewhere as Bayern Munich chase the World Cup hot-shot.

Klose's Bremen teammate Borowski, who won the last of his 29 caps in the 3-1 win over Switzerland last March, told German sports magazine Kicker Klose's departure to Bayern should be allowed if the player wants to go.

The top-scorer at last year's World Cup, Klose has already said he will sign for Bayern when his contract expires in June 2008, but after Bremen midfielder Torsten Frings recently said Klose should go, Borowski is the latest teammate

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Hamilton strikes gold in Montreal

AFP, Montreal



British rookie Lewis Hamilton wrote another amazing chapter in his heroic, if brief, and unprecedented motor racing history on Sunday when he won the Canadian Grand Prix.

The first man of Afro-Caribbean descent to race a Formula One car claimed his maiden victory with a superb, assured drive through the carnage of a dramatic, wild and incident-filled Canadian Grand Prix.

Hamilton, 22, in his McLaren Mercedes-Benz, took full advantage of the first pole position of his career to grab his first win in only his sixth race at the highest level in typically composed and perfectly-focussed fashion.

No wonder sports writers all over the world are predicting a phenomenal career for the youngster from Stevenage in Hertfordshire, England -- they have also dubbed him as F1's answer to golf's black superstar Tiger Woods.

Hamilton's superb win lifted him eight points clear of reigning champion Fernando Alonso and 15 ahead of Brazilian Felipe Massa of Ferrari in the championship standings. In the constructors' championship, McLaren lead now with 88 points to Ferrari's 60.

"He deserved it and I am proud and very happy for him, for Lewis," said the McLaren team chief Ron Dennis afterwards, brushing aside all controversy following last month's Monaco Grand Prix where Hamilton was ordered to finish second behind teammate Alonso.

"He won it fair and square and drove superbly. We came to win, but we like to see both cars do well and today it was not Fernando's day. Once there had been the first safety car intervention, it was not going to be possible for him."

But the 70-laps race was overshadowed by a series of massive accidents and unexpected incidents as the safety car was deployed four times.

Poland's Robert Kubica survived a massive high-speed accident with just a broken leg in his BMW Sauber car and two top drivers were disqualified and two others penalised for infringements.

The two men black-flagged and disqualified were Ferrari's world title challenger Massa and Renault's Italian Giancarlo Fisichella, both for exiting the pit-lane under red flags.

The two penalised for pitting were defending double drivers world champion Spaniard Alonso and German-born Nico Rosberg of Williams, both for pitting when the pit-lane was closed during the first safety car period.

All of this drama left experts

praising the integrity of the Formula One cars, following Kubica's 300 kph crash, and predicting that Hamilton is a future Formula One champion in the making.

Hamilton has reeled off a series of astonishing results in his first six races -- third in Australia followed by four seconds in Malaysia, Bahrain, Spain and Monaco and then this stunning victory.

His win here on Sunday was overwhelming evidence of his class in a race that saw German Nick Heidfeld finish second for Sauber BMW ahead of Austrian Alex Wurz in a Williams-Toyota. Finland's Heikki Kovalainen was fourth for Renault, compatriot Kimi Raikkonen fifth for Ferrari and Japan's Takuma Sato sixth for Super Aguri.

This left Alonso, after a desperate race riddled with problems and off-track excursions, to finish seventh ahead of under-pressure German Ralf Schumacher in a Toyota.

Kubica was reported to be stable and conscious, despite breaking his leg in a horrifying accident that saw his car smash into a wall, barrel-roll across the circuit and then rebound off a steel barrier.

He was lifted out of the car and taken to the circuit medical centre from where he was later air-lifted to hospital.

Real want Beckham stay

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon said on Sunday that the Spanish giant's were going to explore ways of trying to keep former England captain David Beckham at the club.

Beckham stunned the world by announcing on January 11 that he had signed a five-year deal, which could potentially be worth up to 250 million dollars, to move to American side LA Galaxy at the end of this month.

"The public want him to stay and I want him to stay," Calderon told Spanish media in Paris, where he was attending the French Open tennis men's singles final between Spain's Rafael Nadal and Switzerland's Roger Federer.

Calderon said that there was a clause in his contract with the LA Galaxy, which meant that he could stay in the Spanish capital, although it is the first time such an option has been mentioned publicly.

"We need to sit down with him (Beckham), his representatives and with (sporting director Predrag) Mijatovic, look at this clause, and decide between us, but for me I would be delighted if he remained at the club," said Calderon.

But Alexi Lalas, general manager of the Galaxy, rejected the notion Sunday that Beckham would opt out of his contract.

"I don't doubt that Real Madrid would love to have David Beckham next season but the reality is that ship has sailed," Lalas said. "We're looking forward to his arrival. Nothing has changed from our perspective."

In the event that Beckham does stay, and the 32-year-old repeatedly said before this season that he would like to end his career in the Spanish capital, it would herald a

remarkable turnaround in relations between him and Real.

Two days after announcing he was crossing the Atlantic, Real coach Fabio Capello said that Beckham would never play again for the club and kept him on the sidelines for a month before recanting on his decision.

Capello is also believed to have told Calderon earlier in the season, before contract negotiations between Real and Beckham were due to get underway last autumn, that he didn't figure in his long-term plans.

"There was a bit of anger by the premature announcement of his exit, but we are now going to make an effort for him to stay," added Calderon on Sunday.

"Beckham has shown that he is a great player, with great pride."

"He is playing at a fantastic level and yesterday (on Saturday) he fought even though he was half-injured against Zaragoza."

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PHOTO: AFP

Napoli fans celebrate the return of their team to the Italian Serie A in downtown Naples on Sunday.

Napoli shooting for the stars



Football

INTERNET, undated

Aurelio De Laurentiis has swapped the tempers and tantrums of the modern movie industry for the equally-volatile world of professional football in Italy, and he could not have written a better script if he tried.

De Laurentiis, producer of movies such as the 2004 science fantasy romp Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow which starred Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie, has bought into a part of Italian football history, Napoli, and taken the famous old club back to Serie A.

Napoli, who can boast the great Diego Maradona as one of their former

players, had fallen so far after the Argentinian legend's departure in 1990 that they were not starring in stadiums such as the Stadio Olimpico in Rome or the San Siro in Milan any more, but toiling away at smaller, less glamorous clubs in Serie C, the country's third division.

Just three years after Naples-born De Laurentiis acquired the club at the third time of asking - he was given the green light after the outfit was declared bankrupt - the team has won promotion back to the top flight.

Confirmation of their fairytale return came on Sunday when they drew 0-0 with Genoa - a result which also assured the Genovese earned promotion by finishing third in the table.

"It feels as though I am reading a script," admits De Laurentiis. "But

we are only at the beginning of shooting the film."

"This is a new era and I am happy to have taken up this challenge."

"I trust the fans will have patience and respect for this club, something we are in dire need of."

De Laurentiis has taken his latest ambitious project seriously and he quickly installed a new management structure upon taking up the helm. It was immediately successful and the supporters did not have to wait that long to see the azzurri colours of Napoli win again.

More than 50,000 fans turned up regularly at the San Paolo stadium in his first season to support Napoli's fight in the third division.

They gained promotion to Serie B last year and now they have

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