

Suazo set for Inter Milan

AFP, Rome

Cagliari's Honduras international striker David Suazo is set to become the first summer signing for Serie A champions Inter Milan.

"David Suazo can go to Inter," Cagliari president Massimo Cellino was quoted as saying in Wednesday's Gazzetta dello Sport.

The Italian sports daily said the transfer of the 27-year-old forward is likely to go through before the end of the week.

Suazo, who was close to joining AC Milan a year ago, scored 14 goals in Serie A last season.

His best return was 22 goals in 37 matches in the 2005-06 season.

Suazo joined Sardinian side Cagliari from Honduran club Olimpia in 1999.

Japanese booter arrested

AFP, Tokyo

Naoya Kikuchi, midfielder for the J-League's Jubilo Iwata and for Japan's 2004 Olympic team, was arrested on Wednesday for sexual misconduct with a 15-year-old girl, police said.

"I talked to her because she was cute. But I was worried that my football career would be finished if I got caught," police quoted him as saying after he admitted the allegations.

Police said the 22-year-old had sexual relations with the high school girl, who is legally a minor, in the central Japanese city of Hamamatsu last month.

Kikuchi was caught because he left his wallet containing his driver's license in the basket of the girl's bicycle, police said.

"I sincerely apologise to the girl who fell victim in this incident," Iwata president Hiroshi Ukon told reporters on Wednesday at a hastily-arranged press conference at the team's home stadium.

"I feel heavy responsibility as the president, as the club did not guide him enough. We are here to coach professional athletes to be models for young people.

"We are going to punish him severely. At the same time, we are going to examine ourselves so as not to repeat the same incident," he said.

J-League chairman Kenji Onitake separately said he was disappointed by Kikuchi.

"On behalf of the league, I must apologise to the fans and concerned people," he said.

Kikuchi, 22, joined Iwata in 2003 and also played for Albirex Niigata in 2005 before becoming part of Iwata's starting team last season. He has scored five goals in 93 games in the league competition over six years.



PHOTO: AFP

Ex-Bayern Munich manager Felix Magath (C) answers questions from the press in Wolfsburg after being unveiled as the new manager of VfL Wolfsburg on Wednesday.

How Sir Bobby's luck finally ran out

THE TIMES

Now he said he would go to bed for two days. Then come and ask. We're going to enjoy it. We'll worry about Germany in good time. They're very good, we know what confronts us and they know what confronts them.'

Sad to reflect that what awaited England was the meaningless anticlimax of a third place match in Bari, which they'd lose to Italy. 'We've got here,' reflected Bobby Robson later, before the semi-final. 'I don't know how.'

Robson's luck? It certainly ran out in Turin against Germany, when England succumbed on penalties after extra time. And there was arguably ill luck when the Germans led, on the hour a shot by the German full back Andy Brehme hit Parker, curling into the air, over Shilton's head and into the net.

England, who again used Terry Butcher as sweeper but again replaced him in the second half with Trevor Steven, equalised ten minutes from time, when Parker crossed from the right; Jurgen Kohler and Klaus Augenthaler, central defenders, clumsily confused one another, allowing the unmarked Lineker to score. And, in

an iconic moment much analysed in the years since, Gascoigne was cautioned and promptly wept when he realised it would mean suspension from the next match possibly the final. Tears that touched so many. The daft brush had become the sad clown.

Overall, the German team looked tired, but it held out into extra time, during which each team hit the post: Chris Waddle for England, Guido Buchwald for Germany, while Shilton made glorious saves from Lothar Matthaus and Jurgen Klinsmann. But when it came to penalties, Pearce shot into the keeper Ilgner's flying body. Waddle shot over the bar, and England were out.

In a moment of utter fatuity Peter Swales, Manchester City's chairman, and leading member of the Senior International Committee, announced that he would rather England lost the World Cup than Bobby Robson remain. Doubly fatuous, in that Robson had already announced before the tournament that he would not be continuing. So ended a stewardship hardly remarkable for its consistency, yet successful enough in two World Cups.

Salzburg sack Matthaeus

AFP, Vienna

Germany's World Cup-winning captain Lothar Matthaeus has been sacked as coach of Red Bull Salzburg to ease tensions between the German and Salzburg's director of football Giovanni Trapattoni.

The 46-year-old Matthaeus coached the side, formerly known as Austria Salzburg, to the league title last season working under Italian coach Trapattoni, but tensions between the pair forced the club to act, the club said late on Tuesday.

"The board have unanimously decided to part company with coach Lothar Matthaeus with immediate effect," said a statement on the club's website.

"Differences of philosophy meant that a good working relationship would not be sustainable in the long-term."

The 1990 World Cup winner met with Salzburg's multi-millionaire owner Dietrich Mateschitz late on Tuesday to dissolve his contract that was due to finish next year.

The former Bayern Munich midfielder star took his sacking with good grace.

"I accept the decision," said the 150-times capped midfielder Matthaeus, who formerly coached the Hungarian national team.

"There was a difference in opinion over footballing matters and for Red Bull it is better if we go our separate ways, I don't want to endanger the team's chances."

Tuncay steps in at Boro

AFP, Istanbul

Fenerbahce and Turkey striker Tuncay Sanli is set to step into Mark Viduka's boots at Middlesbrough after agreeing personal terms with the English Premiership club.

The 25-year-old is out of contract at the Turkish champions and, subject to a medical, will be moving to the Riverside on a free transfer.

Tuncay's agent, Erdinc Sehit, said the player had been offered a four-year deal on an annual salary of 3.3 million euros.

Tuncay has had a fruitful five seasons with Fenerbahce, winning the league title three times and scoring 77 goals in 207 matches.

He has also become a mainstay of the Turkish national side, and has scored 13 goals in 43 appearances. He is best known in Britain for having scored a hat-trick against Manchester United in the Champions League in 2004.

Middlesbrough have already acquired the services of former Arsenal striker Jeremie Aliadiere as they seek to rebuild in the wake of Viduka's departure for Newcastle and improve on last season's 12th place finish in the Premiership.

SA promise to upstage Germany

AFP, Cape Town

President Thabo Mbeki brushed aside doubts about South Africa's preparations for the 2010 World Cup on Tuesday, vowing to surpass Germany's hosting of last year's tournament.

When FIFA's president Sepp Blatter visits the country later this month, "he will find us well on course with our preparations for both the Federations Cup in 2009 and the FIFA Soccer World Cup in 2010," he said.

"I have no doubt that our local organising committee, government at all levels and everybody concerned will do the necessary work to guarantee that we host a better tournament in 2010 than the excellent 2006 German World Cup," he added in a speech before parliament in Cape Town.

Mbeki quoted from a recent statement by Blatter that: "Plan A is South Africa, Plan B is South Africa and Plan C is South Africa".

Blatter has previously expressed doubt about the slow start of stadium construction for the tournament, the first time the world's biggest sporting event will be staged on African soil.

A Roman puzzle

Football

INTERNET, undated

Alessandro Nesta and Francesco Totti have been the subject of much debate of late. Robbie Dymott looks at possible reasons for their decisions, and in particular, at Francesco Totti.

"If I want to continue at the highest level for many more years, then I have to make some choices. Leaving the Nazionale is one of them," Nesta told 'Tuttosport', placing his priorities and form at the disposal of AC Milan.

This decision is partially understandable given that Nesta's last two World Cups have predominately been marred by injury. The defender has missed four months of this season's campaign with Milan after surgery for a dislocated shoulder and sizeable periods of the previous two seasons with various complaints and as a result, his domestic form has suffered.

Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani agreed with Nesta, blaming his decision on an intense and over-burdening international fixture list: "I think these things happen all over the world. You need to consider that the footballing calendar is very intense."

Even national coach Roberto Donadoni when interviewed at Coverciano before Italy's qualifier with the Faroe Islands admitted: "I think Nesta's decision is final and will not be subject to change. I'm disappointed because he is still relatively young and could give so much more to this team, but I have spoken to him and he explained his motives."

If Nesta's decision to retire from the extra physical burden of interna-

tional call-ups is understandable in the context of the player's low fitness levels, doubts and mystery hang over national teammate Francesco's Totti's prolonged and self-induced absence since the World Cup (which he had not ended).

The Roman's breathtaking club form this season puts his persistent claims of unfitness into serious and credible doubt. He has played despite having a metal plaque in his ankle, become Serie A's top marksman with 26 goals, currently leads the race for European Golden Shoe and will contest Serie A's player of the season vote.

His breathtaking volley in a 4-2 away victory against Sampdoria was one of the goals of the season, and even had home supporters applauding its audacity and technique.

A brief break from the national set-up after the World Cup was completely understandable he competed in Germany having barely recovered from a serious ankle injury sustained in a league match against Empoli last February but his continued absence raised a number of important questions, not just about his supposedly narcissistic self-importance, but also sociological and cultural factors, such as the role of provincialism and regional identity in Italy.

These two decisions are symptomatic of a current, and worrying factor for the future and prestige of international football in which players and clubs put their interests ahead of any national responsibilities. Clubs develop and pay the players a wage, surely their invested interest is a priority over national set-ups which pay no wage and limited compensation if players are injured while on duty!

And could sociological factors be

a conscious or unconscious motive here? Italy is a relatively young European state formed when the disparate states of the Italian peninsula were united under the political and social process of 'Risorgimento' between 1815 and 1871, a process unpopular still with sections of the Italian peoples.

Regional and provincial rivalries and loyalties still exist taking preference over any 'national' pride or identity, and there is still a strong North-South schism. This provincial rivalry was never better explained on the international front than in Italy's infamous 1990 World Cup semi-final encounter with Argentina in Naples, in which sections of the city decided to pledge their support for Napoli hero Diego Maradona and not for their 'compatriots'.

Totti compels and revels in similar adulation and worship. Totti is a symbol of Rome, a torch-bearer for the City. For the fans of AS Roma, their captain, in all his self-driven and enigmatic, stylistic and technical bombast IS Rome. And for Totti, who has turned down offers from Milan, Barcelona and Real Madrid, Rome is the centre of his universe, and his loyalty and love are unequivocal.

If Rome is his wife, Italy his mistress, so to speak, and that could, perhaps, be one explanation, even if a bitter one. Of course, it is just a theory, but then again, one that has become popular in Italy of late.

Porto president under investigation

Football

AFP, Lisbon

The president of Portuguese champions FC Porto has been placed under judicial investigation for allegedly offering the services of prostitutes to referees in order to secure a favourable result for his side, legal sources confirmed Wednesday.

Pinto da Costa allegedly tried to fix a match against league rivals Estrela da Amadora in January 2004 which his side won 2-0.

Retired referee Jacinto Paixao

and his assistants Manuel Quadrado and Jose Chilrito have also been placed under judicial investigation along with club official Reinaldo Teles, and businessman Antonio Araujo.

Da Costa, president of FC Porto for the past 25 years, was charged for the first time in 2005 for three offences of active corruption and corrupt practices, but was released in October of that year.

The affair was filed because of lack of evidence but was reopened following new evidence acquired from telephone tapping and testimony from da Costa's ex-wife Carolina Salgado, who has written a

book on the affair.

These latest judicial investigations are part of the operation code-named "Golden whistle" which is still underway and is probing an alleged network of match-fixing in professional football in Portugal between 2001 and 2004.

The scandal broke in April 2004 and lead to 70 searches and the arrests of 16 sporting officials, of which most were referees suspected of match-fixing.

The 2004 Champions League winners, FC Porto won their 22nd league title last month.