



SHADES OF MARADONA: Argentina and Boca Juniors icon Juan Roman Riquelme (L) speeds with the ball as he is chased by Gremio defender Amoroso during the first leg of the Copa Libertadores final at La Bombonera Stadium in Buenos Aires on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Valencia players in ultras bust-up

AFP, Valencia

Valencia players exchanged insults with a group of hardline fans following training on Wednesday.

The ultras known as the 'Yomus' launched verbal assaults on the players in reference to Saturday's dire 4-2 defeat against neighbours Levante.

"Are you still hungover? You should feel ashamed. You've done everything you could: you've become ridiculous," said the Yomus to the players.

Some players responded to the insults during their training session.

"In the end, all the good players will leave and you'll find yourselves with a shit team," retorted captain David Albelda.

Afterwards, the players cancelled the traditional press conference.

Italy tackling hooliganism

AFP, Rome

The security measures introduced by the Italian government after the football riot which claimed the life of a policeman in Catania in February 2 have resulted in a sharp fall in football-related violence. The National Observer for Sporting Events said on Thursday.

The body -- which oversees security at Italy's sports grounds -- said there had been a 70 per cent decline in hooliganism from the time the new regulations were enforced up until the end of the 2006-07 season, when compared with the same period in the previous year.

It added injuries to policemen dropped by 93 per cent, and injuries to fans by 44 per cent.

Antonio Matarrese, president of the Italian football league (Lega-Calcio), which controls Italy's top two divisions, was delighted with the figures.

"We have returned to normality, but we must never forget what happened in this tragic season," he said. "It has taught us all a lesson."

Police officer Filippo Raciti was killed outside Catania's Massimino stadium after Catania fans went on the rampage before, during and after the Sicilian club's local derby against Palermo.

The security measures introduced included the banning of away fans for high-risk games, more CCTV cameras, crowd filtering zones, named tickets, rigorous body searches and improved stewarding.

Many stadiums were closed to the public until their security came into line with government legislation.

F1 coming to India

AFP, New Delhi

India has won the right to host its first Formula One race in 2009, officials announced Thursday.

The deal was struck to hold the event in the capital New Delhi, said Suresh Kalmadi, president of the Indian Olympic Association, which will promote the race.

"We have received a letter in this regard from Bernie Ecclestone, CEO of Formula One," Kalmadi told reporters.

Funds will be raised from the government and the private sector to build a new F1 track and stadium for the race, said Kalmadi.

"We are looking to identify suitable land for a world-class track," he said.

New Delhi is already preparing to host the Commonwealth Games in 2010. The city, however, lost its bid to organise the 2014 Asian Games and opted out of the race for the 2016 Olympics.

Kalmadi said he was confident

the IOA will meet the financial and infrastructure proposals laid down by Ecclestone before the final contract is signed by the September 30 deadline.

"We are capable enough to raise the money. We have done it in the past. We will do it again," he said.

Asked why New Delhi was chosen as the venue, Kalmadi said: "The Commonwealth Games are coming up. So we will have the international airport, hotels and other infrastructure ready for this."

Formula One supremo Ecclestone has recently promoted India as one of the future markets for motor sport after home-grown Narain Karthikeyan drove for Jordan in the 2005 season.

"India is a country that is probably going to grow quicker than China," Ecclestone said in November.

There has been heightened interest in F1 racing in India after Karthikeyan hit the tracks on the back of Indian sponsorship report-

edly worth 10 million dollars.

The 29-year-old did not race in 2006 but is signed up with Williams as a test driver.

Millions of Indians watch Formula One on television, often with the same passion they reserve for the country's most popular sport - cricket.

There was no immediate reaction to the announcement from federal sports minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, who has opposed the holding of expensive international sporting events in the country.

Aiyar, a former diplomat and ex-foreign ministry spokesman, had described the Asian Games bid as nothing more than a misguided attempt to improve the global image of the country.

The Indian media were sceptical about the prospect of holding a race in New Delhi.

"The capital is no place to have a F1 race because it does not have a culture for motor sports," said

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Real swoop for Dudek

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid have made a sensational move for out-of-contract Liverpool goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek.

The Polish shotstopper, whose current deal with the Merseyside club expires this summer, revealed that the Spanish giants have made a concrete offer for his services, and that he is currently considering the proposition.

Dudek wrote on his official website: "After today's press speculation, I must admit that I have received an offer from one of the greatest clubs on the world, if not the greatest one."

"I was able to keep it in the dark for a long time, because the first contact was established a dozen or so days ago."

"The offer is an honour for me. I am seriously considering it now. As for now, I can say that a few details have already been agreed upon."

The 34-year-old has been Rafael Benitez' second choice keeper at Anfield after Pepe Reina for the last two years, but acquired cult status with Reds fans after his heroics in the Champions League final in 2005.

Should Dudek move to Real, he will undoubtedly once again play second fiddle, this time to Iker Casillas whose position as number one is secure. But the lure of joining one of the biggest clubs in the world may prove the deciding factor for Dudek, who is attracting interest from Real Betis.

Recoba plans Spanish step

INTERNET, undated

Inter striker Alvaro Recoba has confirmed that he is keen on joining Atletico Madrid. "It would be a great opportunity."

Reports had suggested that the Uruguayan was on the verge of moving to Spain, as he only appeared sporadically for the Nerazzurri last season and is eager to be granted more playing time.

"There has not been an official offer yet, but my agent Paco Casal will be in Europe next week and will meet official Miguel Angel Gil, with whom he has an excellent relationship," Recoba told Spanish newspaper AS.

"To play for Atletico is an extraordinary opportunity, they are a great club and I want to join them, even if they don't qualify for the UEFA Cup," added El Chino, who joined Inter in 1997.

"I arrived 10 years ago and I have always played here, except for a short spell at Venezia. I grew up with the Nerazzurri, but now it's time for a change and Atletico can offer me this chance."

The 31-year-old is contracted to Inter until 2008 and President

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Riquelme-inspired Boca crush Gremio

Football

INTERNET, undated

Juan Roman Riquelme inspired Boca Juniors to a 3-0 win over 10-man Gremio in the first leg of the Copa Libertadores final.

The on-loan Villarreal playmaker scored one goal and had a hand in the others as Miguel Angel Russo's side look to lift the trophy for a sixth time.

Inspired by a partisan home crowd at La Bombonera, striker Rodrigo Palacio opened the scoring in the 18th minute with a left-footed finish from close range.

Riquelme floated over a free-kick to the far post, forward Martin Palermo headed back across goal and Palacio tapped in as the Gremio defence appealed for offside.

The Brazilian side had started the brighter of the two teams, but their hopes of an equaliser faded in

the 57th minute when Sandro Goiano was sent off.

The 33-year-old defensive midfielder was shown a straight red card for kicking Boca midfielder Ever Banega in the stomach and will miss the second leg.

Riquelme then doubled the advantage after 73 minutes with a superbly-taken free-kick which nestled into the right corner.

Gremio, twice winners of the competition, squandered an excellent chance in the 88th minute when Boca goalkeeper Mauricio Caranta failed to hold a shot from midfielder Lucas but Diego Souza could only screw his effort wide from the rebound.

A minute later Pablo Ledesma added the third goal with a looping header which two Gremio defenders failed to clear off the line.

Gremio coach Mano Menezes admitted his side being reduced to 10 men could be the turning point over the two fixtures.

"It's difficult to analyse these

situations, but that card was very irresponsible of Sandro Goiano," he said.

"We not only had to play with 10 men for the remainder of the game, but he will also miss the second match."

Boca coach Russo admitted he was surprised by the margin of the victory.

"A result such as this does not happen often in a Copa Libertadores final," he said.

"Winning this title will be an honour for all the players and a chance to enter the history books - the cup cannot escape our grasp."

Man-of-the-match Riquelme is remaining guarded ahead of his side's trip to Porto Alegre for the second leg next Wednesday.

"I hope that the difference be enough," Riquelme said.

"We are happy because we have won the match but now we will rest all week as there are still 90 minutes left to play."

It all ends on Sunday

INTERNET, undated



LFP

David Beckham has insisted Sunday's clash with Real Mallorca will be his last game for Real Madrid ahead of his move to Los Angeles Galaxy.

He insists he was prepared to play out the rest of his career at Madrid but was told in January that his contract would not be renewed.

Real president Ramon Calderon claimed this week that the Spanish club would try to convince Beckham to go back on a five-year agreement to join LA Galaxy and stay with Real, utilising a clause he claimed was in the contract.

But the former England captain insists Sunday's La Liga match against Real Mallorca will be his last

for the club.

"There is no clause in the contract. My last game is Sunday. I have had an incredible time and hopefully I will end with the best ending possible."

"I have had no contact with the president about anything else and I first realised I would be leaving Real in January when I was told my contract wouldn't be renewed."

"I knew I had to decide my future and leaving a club like Real Madrid is very difficult. But the future is very bright and something I'm really looking forward to now. But I'll miss Real Madrid and Spain a huge amount."

"I made a decision, I had to. I needed to make a decision and my option was the United States. I'm very happy about that decision, it's a very exciting prospect."

"The Real Madrid fans have been incredible, not just to me but to my family. That is something I will

never forget in my whole life.

"I have to say thank you for that. I could without a doubt have stayed for two or three more years, I could have stayed for the rest of my career but things change."

"I have a lot of respect for the president and Fabio Capello, he is one of the best managers in football."

Another Real stalwart, Roberto Carlos will play his last match for the Merenguese on Sunday against Mallorca. However, Carlos admitted Wednesday that he never wanted to leave Real Madrid.

The 34-year-old has enjoyed a glittering career since arriving at the Santiago Bernabeu from Inter Milan in 1996.

But he admitted he was bitter about the manner in which his career in Spain has come to an end.

"I have many friends here and I didn't want to leave Real Madrid,"

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PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham arrives at his last press conference in Madrid on Thursday. Beckham will be playing his last game for Real on Sunday against Real Mallorca.

Capello future still undecided

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Even winning the Spanish title might not save Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello from the sack, according to Spanish press reports on Thursday.

Media reports suggest Capello's relationship with club president Ramon Calderon remains strained, despite the pair having a meeting on Tuesday that ended 'cordially' according to a Real statement.

Any decision on Capello's future will be taken after the final match of the season at home to Mallorca on Sunday, the statement claimed.

The press speculated that the conversation between coach and president was short with Capello, who is in his second spell in charge of the club having won the league title in his one previous season at the helm in 1997, stating his aim to see out the final two years of his

contract but Calderon remaining non-committal.

Calderon is rumoured to want to bring in Getafe's German coach Bernd Schuster for next season and is thought to consider Capello's tactics to be too defensive.

However, dismissing Capello would be expensive given the Italian's four-million-euro salary.

And Calderon will find it even harder to justify if Capello lands a second title in his second season in charge of the Madrid giants.

Meanwhile, Real have received a boost with the news that David Beckham, Robinho and Mahamadou Diarra are all set to face Mallorca.

Beckham has recovered from an ankle injury picked up in the last match, a 2-2 draw at Real Zaragoza.

"Beckham has recovered from an injury to the internal ligament of his ankle.... and he has been running this morning," said a Real statement on Thursday.

"His participation for the Mallorca match is no longer in doubt."

Robinho is in Brazil's Copa

America squad but both world football governing body FIFA and Brazilian Federation CBF confirmed on Tuesday that the forward would have special dispensation to play in the final game of the season, according to newspapers As and Marca, although that has not been confirmed.

Also according to the papers, Diarra has been let off international duty with Mali this weekend despite their African Nations Cup qualifier against Sierra Leone.

That news has yet to be confirmed officially but it brought an angry reaction from Sevilla, who at two points behind Barcelona and Real still have a chance to win the title on Sunday.

Their striker Freddie Kanoute has been called up to Mali's squad for the Sierra Leone match.

"Kanoute should be allowed to play with us on Sunday," Sevilla president Jose Maria del Nido told As when informed of the Diarra news.

Sevilla are also in contact with FIFA and the Malian federation over the issue.

Tennis

AFP, London

Lleyton Hewitt will go back to basics in the aftermath of his shock Queen's exit as he turns his attention to Wimbledon.

Defending champion Hewitt was aiming for a record fifth title at Queen's, but instead the Australian suffered a 7-6, 7-6 second round defeat against French qualifier Jo-Wilfried Tsonga that left his Wimbledon preparations in disarray.

Hewitt claimed the loss was harsh since he had played relatively well, but he will go straight back to the practice courts to work the defeat out of his system.

The former Wimbledon winner admits the All-England club is one of his favourite venues and he is determined not to let his challenge there be derailed by Tsonga's victory.

He is unlikely to enter next week's Nottingham Open because he believes he is already in good enough form and he said: "I'll just be practising. I've put in the hard yards on the practice court since I lost at Roland Garros."

"I haven't really had a day off. I've been hitting twice a day and I've been in the gym as well."

"I feel good physically but I will try and freshen up over the next week to try and be ready for Wimbledon."

Tsonga produced a display well above his ATP ranking of 121 as he played the match of his life and Hewitt conceded it was one of those days when everything his opponent hit turned into a winner.



PHOTO: AFP

Jo-Wilfred Tsonga of France celebrates a point against Australia's Lleyton Hewitt during their Artois tennis tournament match in London on Wednesday. Tsonga beat Hewitt 7-6, 7-6.