

Ze Roberto back at Bayern

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich have re-signed winger Ze Roberto a year after choosing not to extend his contract.

The Brazilian struggled to adjust to the change in direction when Felix Magath took over from Ottmar Hitzfeld and moved to FC Santos.

Now Hitzfeld is back at the helm, it needed little to convince Ze Roberto to also return.

"We are delighted to have won back a technically gifted, quick and energetic player at FC Bayern," said Bayern president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, after the 32-year-old passed a medical and signed a two-year contract on Friday.

He becomes the seventh confirmed new signing of the close season, joining big names such as Luca Toni and Franck Ribery in a side which should win the Bundesliga with something to spare next season.

"Our rivals will need a telescope to see us," said general manager Uli Hoeneß before he took a holiday after a busy few weeks in the transfer market.

And Ze Roberto may not be the final piece in the jigsaw for the UEFA Cup favourites.

There is still place for Werder Bremen's Miroslav Klose, who has already given the Bavarians his word that he will sign next season "at the latest".



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian players Robinho (L) and Mineiro fight for possession during a training session at Puerto de La Cruz in Venezuela on Thursday.

The cream of the crop

Renowned sports journalist and broadcaster **Gabriel Marcotti** runs the rule over the best players on the planet. Here is his pick of the 50 best footballers today. In our countdown, we initially look at the last fifteen.

Football

When my editor suggested putting together a list of the top 50 players, I greeted it with a healthy dose of apprehension. For journalists, such lists are often a lose-lose proposition, exposing you to ridicule and, occasionally, venom. Then again, they do generate debate and I like open-ended discussions as much as the next guy.

But before we get into it, here are the usual caveats. Making comparisons between different positions on the pitch is extremely difficult. Equally, while I do watch a lot of football (far more than is healthy), I haven't watched most of these players week in, week out, for all ninety minutes. Then again, nobody has. So what you're getting is a combination of personal assessment and, perhaps more importantly, the distilled views of people I talk to, from scouts to fellow journalists, from agents to managers, from club officials to, yes, ordinary fans.

I couldn't even begin to compile such a list without basic criteria. So here they are: imagine you are the manager of a totally new team. You have a certain budget to spend, but first you get one freebie, one guy to build your team around. You get him only for one season, the 2007-08 campaign, so you want to go for who can do the best job for you here and now, without worrying how good he can be down the line. Who would you choose? Who would your "ringer" be? Here is my selection:

50. **Gary Neville (Manchester United)**

A right back is admittedly an unusual choice, but Neville brings a host of intangibles to the table, from leadership to experience to consistency.

49. Clarence Seedorf (Milan)

You don't win four Champions League crowns with three different clubs by accident. Perhaps he doesn't turn it on as often as he once did, but his collection of rabbit's feet alone makes him a worthwhile punt.

48. Jefferson Farfan (PSV Eindhoven)

He gives you trickery, pace and width, plus a host of goals (42 in the Dutch league over the past two years, a remarkable total for a guy who is not a genuine centre forward).

47. Phillip Lahm (Bayern Munich)

Little Mr Consistency runs all day and is a reliable source of goal-saving tackles and pinpoint crosses. Arguably the best left back around.

46. Rodrigo Palacio (Boca Juniors)

Probably the most reliable striker outside Europe. Something of a late bloomer, at 25 he's really hitting his stride.

45. Diego (Werder Bremen)

Stick him in the hole behind two strikers and watch him weave his magic. He's Kaka-lite (or, given his corpulent build, Kaka-heavy).

44. Rino Gattuso (Milan)

Steven Gerrard's ghostwriters may not rate him, but most of the rest of us do. He runs himself into the ground, lifts the crowd and never gives up.

43. Hernan Crespo (Inter)

139 goals in his past 209 league starts in Serie A and the

Premiership tell only part of the story. His movement up front is also straight out of a footballing textbook.

42. Klaas-Jan Huntelaar (Ajax)

By all accounts, he had a poor season - "just" 21 league goals (down from 33 last year). That says it all. Comparisons to Marco van Basten may be wide of the mark, but he'll get you goals.

41. Alessandro Nesta (Milan)

Now that he's fit again, strikers beware: he's unnaturally quick, strong in the tackle and about as athletic as anyone playing the game today.

40. Juninho Pernambucano (Lyon)

Elegant and creative, but also with an edge when necessary, he can light up any side. Plus, he'll get his usual haul of set-piece goals.

39. "Luchito" Gonzalez (Porto)

A box-to-box dervish who gets his fair share of goals and is a natural leader to boot. If only he played in a higher profile league...

38. Paul Scholes (Manchester United)

He redefined the role of attacking midfield player in the Premiership. The one concern is how well he would do away from his mentor, Sir Alex Ferguson.

37. Daniele De Rossi (Roma)

The poor man's Roy Keane. Runs the midfield with intensity and intelligence and, like Keane, occasionally falls prey to the red mist (just ask Brian McBride).

36. Dejan Stankovic (Inter)

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(...to be continued)

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PHOTO: INTERNET
Real Madrid defender Fabio Cannavaro (R) and his wife Daniela arrive for the 32nd America's Cup Party in Valencia on Thursday.

Michael Laudrup, Ronald Koeman and Arsene Wenger are among the contenders to become Real Madrid coach should Fabio Capello depart the Bernabeu, club president Ramon Calderon has revealed. Capello led Madrid to their first title in four years but that has not stopped speculation he could leave the Spanish capital, despite having two years remaining on his contract. Calderon said: "(Sporting director Predrag) Mijatovic has spoken to me about Laudrup, Koeman and Wenger, among others." Mijatovic will be central to any decision, with the club likely to announce early next week whether there will be a change in the dugout. "We are waiting on the report from the club's sporting department. They will make recommendations as to whether Capello should

Riquelme, Veron back

AGENCIES, Buenos Aires

Juan Roman Riquelme has been handed a recall to the Argentina squad.

The mercurial playmaker, who played his final game for Boca Juniors in the Copa Libertadores final on Wednesday, is among 22 players named for the Copa America.

Riquelme is among a four-man Boca contingent also consisting Daniel Diaz, Hugo Ibarra and Rodrigo Palacio.

Argentina are the competition favourites, taking a full-strength squad to Venezuela, while rivals Brazil are missing star men Kaka and Ronaldinho.

Alfonso Basile's side kick off their campaign against the USA in Maracanã on June 28.

Squad

Goalkeepers: Roberto Abbondanzieri (Getafe/ESP), Juan Pablo Carrizo (River Plate), Agustin Orion (San Lorenzo)

Defenders: Roberto Ayala (Valencia/ESP), Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan/ITA), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter/ITA), Hugo Ibarra (Boca Juniors), Daniel Diaz (Boca Juniors), Gabriel Milito (Real Zaragoza/ESP), Gabriel Heinze (Manchester United/ENG)

Midfielders: Luis Gonzalez (Porto/POR), Javier Mascherano (Liverpool/ENG), Esteban Cambiasso (Inter Milan/ITA), Fernando Gago (Real Madrid/ESP), Pablo Aimar (Real Zaragoza/ESP), Juan Sebastian Veron (Estudiantes de La Plata), Juan Roman Riquelme (Boca Juniors)

Forwards: Lionel Messi (Barcelona/ESP), Hernan Crespo (Inter Milan/ITA), Diego Milito (Real Zaragoza/ESP), Carlos Tevez (West Ham/ENG), Rodrigo Palacio (Boca Juniors)

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