

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".

Hinkel slams Loew

AFP, Berlin

FC Seville's German defender Andreas Hinkel says Germany coach Joachim Loew has ignored him while he plays his football in Spain, it was reported on Friday.

The 25-year-old right-back, who won the UEFA Cup with Seville last season, told German newspaper Bild he has not spoken to Loew since he was told that he would not be selected for last year's World Cup and feels he is being ignored.

"Of course I am disappointed with Loew," said the 17-times capped Hinkel. "The fact is the last phonecall I had from the German Football Association was before the last World Cup, when I was told I had not been selected.

"Since then there has been a radio silence."

Having made his debut in 2003, Hinkel has not played since Germany's 2-0 defeat against Slovakia in September 2005 and says the German coaching staff have not seen him play enough games.

"I must honestly say that I don't need to hide from anybody. The problem can't be that I play in Spain.

"There is a German international playing a few kilometres away for Betis and he is constantly observed."

Roma sign Juan

INTERNET, undated

AS Roma have signed Brazil defender Juan from Bayer Leverkusen, the Serie A runners-up said on Thursday.

Juan, currently preparing for the Copa America with Brazil, has cost 6.3 million euros (8.44 million USD) and has signed a four-year contract.

As part of the deal, Roma will visit Leverkusen for a pre-season friendly on 29 July.

The purchase of Juan will increase speculation about the future of Roma's Romanian centre back Cristian Chivu.

Inter Milan have been considering a bid but Roma said on Wednesday they were not in negotiations with the Italian champions.

Nigeria ban Mikel

INTERNET, undated

The Chelsea midfielder John Obi Mikel has been indefinitely suspended from representing Nigeria at international level for failing to make himself available for the national team.

The 20-year-old pulled out of the African Nations Cup qualifier against Uganda three weeks ago, citing a hamstring injury. Chelsea confirmed that he was undergoing treatment in London in a letter to the Nigerian Football Association but failed to release him for independent assessment by Nigeria's doctors.

The NFA spokesman Ademola Olajire said yesterday: "Mikel's gross act of indiscipline and lack of commitment towards national call-ups is totally unacceptable. Since Mikel prefers his club over his country, we can only wish him the best of luck."

Mikel was dropped by the Nigeria coach, Berti Vogts, from the Nations Cup squad that defeated Niger 3-1 last weekend.



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 have begun 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. "Lucho" 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)**  
His long-range goals make the highlight reels, but his real contribution is the way he can effortlessly slot into any midfield position.

(...to be continued)

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.

Alfo Basile's side kick off their campaign against the USA in Maracaibo 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)

GOLD CUP USA- Mexico final

AFP, Chicago

The United States and Mexico set up a Gold Cup showdown on Thursday, advancing to the final of the CONCACAF regional football tournament.

The United States scored two first-half goals en route to a 2-1 victory over Canada that ended amid controversy.

Frankie Hejduk in the 39th minute and Landon Donovan from the penalty spot in the 45th gave the defending champion United States a 2-0 halftime lead, and the US held on book their sixth appearance in the Gold Cup final in nine editions of the tournament.

In the second semifinal, Pavel Pardo's 69th-minute strike was enough to give Mexico a 1-0 victory over Guadeloupe.

The title match is on Sunday at Chicago's Soldier Field.

The USA-Canada match ended acrimoniously after Canada's Altiba Hutchinson appeared to knot the score in injury time, only to have officials rule the play offside.

Canadian players argued the call vehemently and had to be restrained from going after the linesman as he left the field at the end of the match.

"Their player headed the ball backwards, so we can't be offside in that situation," Canadian coach Stephen Hart insisted. "Referees are something I am not in control of, and they are like us, they have good days and bad days."

Canada's Dwayne De Rosario said his teammates "feel cheated."

"When you play teams like US and Mexico, you are not going to get calls, you have to beat them straight up," he said.

The Gold Cup winners qualify for the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup in South Africa.

THAKSIN TAKEOVER

Mixed reactions from Thais

Football

AFP, Bangkok

Thais reacted to deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra's bid to take over Manchester City Friday with a mix of scepticism and pride, with some seeing it as a ploy to restore his popularity at home.

The English club accepted Thaksin's 81.6-million-pound bid, worth 121.5 million euros or 162.6 million dollars, in London Thursday, which came hours after Thai prosecutors laid formal criminal corruption charges against him.

Since last year's coup, the self-made billionaire has remained in exile and currently lives in London.

The Man City deal was blazed across front pages of Thai papers Friday, but public relation consultant Narongchai Sampakdee said it was typical ploy of Thaksin's to distract attention from the graft allegations.

"The purchase of the English Premier League Club is just a tactic

for Thaksin to improve his image," said Narongchai. "Don't even hope that this deal can benefit the Thai people."

Even in Thaksin's hometown Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, Noi, a 48-year-old housewife, said people wondered whether Thaksin's takeover money might be tainted.

"Thaksin is a genius and has a lot of money. But many people are sceptical whether his money is clean or not," said Noi.

She said Thaksin should invest money in Thailand instead of buying the English club as the kingdom's economy has slowed down due to a slump in consumer confidence and ongoing political uncertainty.

The Thai junta justified the coup by saying Thaksin was corrupt and it would probe abuse during his five years in office.

Last week, a powerful anti-graft panel froze on some 52.9 billion baht (1.52 billion dollars) of funds belonging to Thaksin and his family as part of the junta's investigations.

Sontahaya Klaitook, a 36-year-old businessman in the southern paradise island of Phuket, welcomed Thaksin's takeover.

"If Thaksin can bring Thai players to English football teams after the takeover, it's good for Thailand," Sontahaya said.

But he said the proposed purchase of Manchester City was "politically motivated" for Thaksin "to regain his popularity."

In Bangkok, Poonvit Phuwarang, a 25-year-old engineer, said he supported Thaksin's deal.

"It is great for Thai football players. They may have a chance to play in English teams," said Poonvit.

Norasak Singhasanee, a 21-year-old student, agreed.

"It's cool to have a Thai businessman own an overseas football club," he said.

"The deal will help people abroad know about Thailand," Norasak.

Spaniards fancy Real Madrid

INTERNET, undated



Almost a third of Spaniards are fans of Real Madrid, according to a fascinating sociological study.

The report comes from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas (Centre for Sociological Investigations) in Madrid Thursday and was reproduced by the digital version of Marca.

The Centro carried out 2,473 interviews with Spaniards of all ages and regions, and of both sexes, between May 19-28.

Some 32.8 per cent of the people interviewed confessed to being Real Madrid fans, with Barcelona coming in second place with 25.7

percent.

The third most popular club is Valencia, with 5.3 per cent. Then comes Athletic Bilbao (5.1 per cent) and Atletico Madrid (4.3 per cent).

In total 39 per cent of the people interviewed agreed with the statement that 'the league can only be won by one of the teams with most money,' and 40 per cent with the statement that 'there is a lot of money in football and there exists corruption.'

Some 34.2 per cent agreed that 'the decisions of the referees always favour the same clubs and this changes the results.' Only 28.4 per cent agreed with the statement that 'in general the league is a clean competition, not manipulated.'

In all 70.6 per cent believe that football receives 'excessive attention' from the means of communication while 72.8 per cent of people questioned say that they watch the

matches of their team on television, though only 21 per cent are prepared to pay (on the pay-per-view system) to do this.

Some 36.9 per cent go to the stadia to watch their teams 'when possible.'

With regard to the emotional impact of football on their lives, 32 per cent say that they are 'sad' when their team loses an important game while 24.5 per cent confess to 'getting annoyed' with their family members or friends when this happens.

Only 19.8 per cent of the interviewees confess to being 'strong followers' of the Spanish national team, though 75.6 per cent would be 'disappointed' if Spain failed to qualify for the 2008 European Championship finals.

Spain are currently second in qualifying group F, with 15 points from seven games.



PHOTO: AFP

Australian midfielder ace Tim Cahill (2nd L) has a kickabout with children in a football clinic in Singapore on Friday.

Socceroos like favourites tag

Football

AFP, Singapore

Australia have never been favourites to win a football tournament before and they are revelling in it, while being cautious about underestimating any team at the Asian Cup.

The Socceroos, minus Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell who arrive Sunday, had their first taste of the hot and humid Asian conditions Friday after landing here from Sydney and having a run-out with some local schoolchildren.

Middlesbrough goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer said it was new sensation being considered favourites and it was driving the team to capitalise on their successful World Cup in Germany last year.

"It's new to us and a challenge we are all looking forward to," said the 34-year-old.

"It's nice to go into a tournament having the respect already of your opponents, whereas previously people have seen us as a team that could be brushed aside quite easily.

"I think that the last World Cup proves that you can't underestimate us.

"We are rightly one of the favourites but I think any one of a couple of teams can win the tournament. Iran,

South Korea, Japan, they have been consistent at World Cups and are definitely a real threat."

The Socceroos made the last 16 at the World Cup in Germany before Italy sent them packing with a controversial last minute penalty.

It was the country's best-ever achievement in two World Cup campaigns, spanning 32 years, and announced their arrival as a force to be reckoned with.

Palermo star Mark Bresciano knows it is crucial to perform well at the Asian Cup, co-hosted next month by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

"We now have good exposure around the world and I think people around the world respect us as a footballing nation," he said here.

"It is very important to have a good Asian Cup to keep the momentum going, for us as players and for the sport in Australia. It won't be easy but we will give it a good go."

Like Schwarzer, Bresciano, whose penetrating forward runs could prove vital for Australia at the Asian Cup, is relishing the favourites tag.

"It is very satisfying, it's something that Australia has been looking for for some time," he said.

"Now that we have finally qualified for a World Cup and had a successful World Cup I think a lot of

people are looking at Australian football differently."

Australia are grouped with Thailand, Oman and Iraq and while none of the teams should prove an obstacle, Everton attacking midfielder Tim Cahill is not getting carried away with the expectation that Australia should win the tournament.

"They're all technically gifted and we have a lot of respect for these nations," he said of their group opponents.

"Our main aim is to get through the group stage and to try get through undefeated, but it will be hard.

"It is the first time we've gone into a competition being favourites and it's a massive compliment and we're happy with that.

"We have a lot of great players who are ready for this task, but we just need to concentrate on our first three games. We can't disrespect anyone."

Australia open their campaign against Oman in Bangkok on July 8. Prior to that they play a warm-up against Singapore on June 30.



PHOTO: INTERNET

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

Wenger on Madrid wish-list

INTERNET, undated



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," Calderon continued.

"They will make recommendations as to whether Capello should

continue as coach. We will decide on Monday or Tuesday."

Asked if Capello had fulfilled his objectives, Calderon replied: "The objective we asked of him (La Liga title) is the one he delivered."

Calderon claims the club have had no contact with Getafe coach Bernd Schuster, seen by many as the prime contender should Capello leave.

"We cannot talk to anyone who has a contract, but if we need a coach and Schuster becomes available then I imagine Mijatovic will look at him," said Calderon.

The Madrid supremo admitted he wanted Schuster coach to take over first-team affairs when he was elected last year, but Mijatovic persuaded him Capello was the man for the job.

"At the start of last season I thought Schuster would be the best coach," Calderon said.

"But Mijatovic told me he was not the right man at that time and that we needed Fabio Capello. Mijatovic has never been questioned."