

New qualifying format for Europe

INTERNET, undated

The Champions League and European qualifying for the 2010 World Cup are to undergo changes, announced UEFA.

From 2007-08 the Champions League will also have a seeding system in the draw for the quarterfinals.

This is to prevent teams who are already qualified from resting their players in the final one or two Group games, as that will affect their standing.

Clubs will receive two points for a win and one for a draw in the seeding system drawn up at the end of the first knock-out round.

UEFA have also confirmed that the qualifying set-up for the 2010 World Cup, set to be staged in South Africa.

The European teams will be split into eight groups of six squads each and one group of five.

The nine winners will qualify directly for the tournament and the eight runners-up go through a two-legged play-off.

All 53 member nations of UEFA will enter for the chance to be one of the 13 European sides in the World Cup finals.

Azerbaijan and Armenia's record was hit today, as they failed to decide on where to stage their Group B matches on September 8 and 12.

So UEFA have cancelled the fixtures and handed the teams 0 points for the encounters.

They are in Group B along with Poland, Serbia, Portugal, Finland, Belgium and Kazakhstan.

Anelka to step in to Henry shoes

AFP, London

Mercurial French striker Nicolas Anelka is being lined up for a dramatic return to former club Arsenal as a replacement for compatriot Thierry Henry, according to reports Sunday.

Arsenal confirmed on Saturday they had reached agreement to transfer their star striker Henry to Spanish giants Barcelona.

The iconic Henry's departure after eight years at the club will leave a gaping hole in the Gunner's front line, and manager Arsene Wenger has already drawn up a shortlist of replacements.

According to The Sunday Telegraph and the News of the World, Bolton striker Anelka -- who has been on sizzling form for France during the Euro 2008 qualifiers -- is top of the list.

Anelka's contract at Bolton does not expire until 2010, however the former Paris St Germain, Real Madrid and Liverpool striker is desperate to play in the Champions League. He also declared recently he would jump at the chance to move to one of the Premiership's 'big' clubs.

Recent boardroom changes at Arsenal, which played a hand in Henry's decision to leave, have led to uncertainty over Wenger's commitment to the club.

Creative midfielder Cesc Fabregas said he would almost certainly leave if Wenger quits, however the fact the Frenchman has already been busy sounding out a replacement for Henry suggests he is going nowhere.

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PHOTO: INTERNET

Sevilla captain Javi Navarro (R) and Jose Luis Marti celebrate with the Spanish King's Cup after beating Getafe 1-0 in the final at the Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday.

Galliani seeks Barca stars

Football

INTERNET, undated

Adriano Galliani reveals why Milan decided to drop David Suazo and Thierry Henry, but confirms they're seeking a new forward at Barcelona.

It has been an eventful week for the Rossoneri Vice-President. He struck a 10m-pound deal with Cagliari for Suazo only to discover he had already signed for Inter and on Saturday officially relinquished their hold on the Honduran.

"I spoke with President Silvio Berlusconi and he completely agreed with our decision not to get into a bidding war. There was the real risk of a mess emerging. We all liked Suazo, but life goes on," noted Galliani.

"I spoke to Massimo Moratti many times recently and right from the start I was pleased to see the Nerazzurri did not think we acted unfairly. Milan took the player's wishes into account and released him without any nasty afters.

"There is too much talk in Italian

football and we didn't need another weight. As a former Lega Calcio President, I can say that a sense of responsibility played a huge part in my decision on Suazo. Can you imagine an appeal to FIFA with the Scudetto winners fighting against the European champions? No, thanks. Better to retire and look ahead."

The Rossoneri are certainly doing that, with talk -- now confirmed by Galliani -- that they will pool all their resources into snatching either Eto'o or Ronaldinho from Barcelona.

"I tell the fans what I already reminded Berlusconi of. In 1986 we lost Gianluca Viali because he refused the transfer. We didn't get down in the dumps, instead going to sign Marco van Basten. Perhaps we would have won more with Viali, but with Marco...

"At the moment Eto'o is not on the market and he says he wants to stay at Barcelona. Eto'o is at the top of our list and I have never hidden that."

Galliani has often protested about the different tax breaks that football clubs receive in Italy and

around Europe, so it seems once again this could prove decisive -- as it already has this summer.

"The problem is the difference in the financial regime in Spain. We experienced the same problem with Henry," revealed the transfer guru.

"We were very close to the Frenchman and Leonardo had worked hard on convincing him. We would not have had problems handing over 16m pounds to Arsenal, but the 6.7m-pound per season net wages are not sustainable for us. To be clear, Barcelona's contract with Henry costs them less than 10m pounds gross, but for us the same wages would cost 13.5m pounds.

"Unfortunately, this is the truth now. We have to get used to it. Years back Ajax, Red Star Belgrade and Steaua Bucharest could challenge for the Champions League. Now they have vanished because they can't sustain certain costs.

"It'll get worse, as a new Government plan will take away resources from the big clubs to give to the smaller sides. We'll get a more balanced Serie A, but the decline in Europe could follow."

Sevilla complete Cup double

Football

INTERNET, undated

Sevilla crowned an outstanding season with victory in the Copa del Rey final when a first-half strike from leading scorer Frederic Kanoute earned them a 1-0 win over Bernd Schuster's Getafe.

Kanoute grabbed the winner in a tight, hot-tempered contest at the Bernabeu stadium when he raced clear from a few metres inside the Getafe half and stroked the ball past goalkeeper Luis Garcia into the net after 11 minutes.

But the evening ended on a low note for the Mali striker when he was sent off for retaliating after being fouled in the dying minutes of the game.

For his team, however, it was a fitting end to a brilliant campaign that began with victory over

3 skip Mexico's Copa squad

INTERNET, undated

Mexico's European-based defenders Ricardo Osorio and Carlos Salcido and midfielder Pavel Pardo have dropped out of the squad for the Copa America.

The three were missing from the 22-man list announced by the Mexican Football Federation (FMF) on its official Web site.

Mexican media reports said the trio, preparing for Sunday's Gold Cup final against the United States in Chicago, had asked coach Hugo Sanchez to be excused because they were tired.

"I was a player and I have to look at the human side," Sanchez, who has been fiercely criticised for his team's performances in the Gold Cup, said in the daily newspaper Reforma on Saturday.

"We respect their decisions and have to decide how to face them."

Salcido will be replaced by Gonzalo Pineda while Israel Castro takes Osorio's place and Jaime Correa steps in for Pardo.

Mexico made one another change from the Gold Cup squad, with striker Francisco Fonseca making way for Juan Carlos Cacho.

Barcelona defender Rafael

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Lotina poised for Depor hotseat

AFP, Madrid

Spanish coach Miguel Angel Lotina, who has resigned from relegated Real Sociedad, said Saturday he was very close to a move to Primera Liga club Deportivo La Coruna.

"I am not going to deny that very advanced talks are underway with Deportivo but I have not yet signed anything," the 50-year-old told journalists in the northern city of San Sebastian.

Deportivo have been without a coach since Joaquin Caparros resigned Thursday after leading the club to a 13th-place finish in the Spanish league.

Lotina took over Sociedad in October after they had made a weak start under Jose Mari Bakero who was sacked by the San Sebastian-based club.

Barcelona in the European Super Cup and continued with a successful defence of the UEFA Cup when they beat fellow Spaniards Espanyol last month.

"I can't find the words to explain a season like this," said Sevilla captain Javi Navarro. "It's going to take time for all of this to sink in. We've made a huge effort and now we've been rewarded for it."

Getafe coach Bernd Schuster won six Copa del Reys as a player but his luck deserted him this time as the first-time finalists fought tooth and nail throughout but lacked the firepower to break down the street-wise Sevilla defence.

There was some consolation for the modest Madrid side, however, because they will play in the UEFA Cup next season because Sevilla have qualified for the Champions League.

Although Getafe hail from a modest satellite town to the south of

the Spanish capital, their supporters were heavily outnumbered at the Bernabeu by the thousands of Sevilla fans who had travelled up from the south.

The Andalucians responded to the electric atmosphere with a high-tempo start, but it was the Madrid side who had the first chance to take the lead.

Swiss midfielder Fabio Celestini put striker Daniel Guiza in the clear, but just as it looked as though he might skip past Andres Palop on the edge of the area, the Sevilla keeper managed to sweep the ball away from his feet.

A minute later opposite number Kanoute gave Guiza a masterclass in finishing.

Snapping up a loose ball after an error by centre-back Ruben Pulido on the halfway line, the Mali striker galloped down the pitch and coolly steered a low shot into the net.

Juande Ramos's side were

denied a second when Garcia made a great reaction save to beat away a fierce drive from midfielder Renato after good work by fellow Brazilians Luis Fabiano and Daniel Alves.

Getafe fought back hard in the final 10 minutes of the first half, but although they gave the Sevilla back four a couple of scares they were unable to trouble Palop.

The Andalucians remained in control for most of the second period but were unable to extend their advantage against gritty opponents.

The match was soured by a series of flare-ups between players in the closing minutes with Kanoute receiving his marching orders for kicking out after a foul by Francisco Casquero.

It mattered little to the 50,000 Sevilla fans packed into the Bernabeu. They exploded with delight at the final whistle as their team won their first Cup since 1948.

Messi delighted at Henry arrival

INTERNET, undated



Barcelona's impending capture of Arsenal striker Thierry Henry has been welcomed by the Spanish giants' playmaker Lionel Messi. Henry is due in the

Catalan city on Sunday evening to finalise his move from Arsenal, and if all goes well the Frenchman is expected to be presented as a Barca player on Monday.

Messi for one is delighted by the chance to play alongside Henry -- Arsenal's record goalscorer will reportedly pen a four-year deal at

the Nou Camp and will cost Barca 16million pounds.

"Henry is a great player, for that reason he comes to Barca," Messi said.

"'Titi' (Henry) has shown during all these years that he is a great player. Cesc (Fabregas) has always said that 'Titi' is fantastic in training and that he is even better away from the pitch, as a friend and a leader."

Henry's arrival at the Nou Camp would give Barca coach Frank Rijkaard a wealth of attacking options next season, with the likes of Samuel Eto'o, Ronaldinho, Eidur Gudjohnsen and Messi already on the books.

That may mean less playing time next season for each star, but Messi believes the increased competition

can only be good for the team.

"For me, the presence of Henry does not worry me. I am not a child anymore and I know what I am capable of," the Argentina international told El Mundo Deportivo.

"I don't know how we will play, this is something that must be resolved by Rijkaard, but if Henry signs it is because Frank knows how we will play to make us even stronger."

The highly-rated youngster added: "I always want to play, as I imagine any professional footballer does."

"I am 20, but I know that they are not the 20 years of the average football player, I have already participated in some big games."

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PHOTO: AFP

Uruguay players Diego Lugano (L) and Cristian Rodriguez fights for the ball during a training session for their Copa America campaign in Merida, Venezuela on Saturday. The tournament starts on the 26th.

Federer looks Borg in the eye Wimbledon starts today

AP, Wimbledon



So much for resisting change at Wimbledon. They're embracing it.

Women will earn the same prize money as men for the first time this year. Video screens will help players challenge calls. A retractable roof is on the way.

Doesn't tradition mean anything?

Well, there is one thing -- besides the white clothes every competitor must wear and the grass underfoot - that remains the same: As the defending men's singles champion, Roger Federer will once again have the honour of being first to stride out on Centre Court when action begins Monday.

If it seems the Swiss star enters each major with a chance to do something historic, it's because he does. Two weeks after coming up just short of completing a career Grand Slam on the red clay of Roland Garros, Federer heads to the All England Club, where he'll try to do something only one man has done in the last 100 years: win a fifth

consecutive Wimbledon.

"That," Federer said, "would be absolutely incredible."

Bjorn Borg won Wimbledon every year from 1976 to 1980, and the only other men who claimed at least five straight titles did it back in the days when the reigning champion automatically advanced to the final -- in other words, they needed to win only one match to retain the trophy.

For a little perspective, consider that greats of the grass game such as Rod Laver, John McEnroe and Boris Becker maxed out at two Wimbledon championships back-to-back. And Pete Sampras, who won half of his record 14 major titles at Wimbledon, was stopped at four in a row.

Pistol Pete's streak was snapped by a fourth-round loss in 2001 to ... guess who?

Federer.

"Roger is fun to watch. He's graceful," Sampras said in a telephone interview earlier this year. "Roger is dominating the game much more than I ever did. What he's done the last three years hasn't ever been done in the sport."

When Wimbledon begins, Federer will be entering his record 178th consecutive week at number one in the rankings. He's won six of

the previous eight Grand Slams, 10 of the past 16. He also takes a record 48-match winning streak on grass into the first round.

For him, as for many players and fans alike, winning Wimbledon is the be-all and end-all of tennis. For him, success on the sport's most hallowed ground takes away the sting of near-misses at Roland Garros, where he lost to nemesis Rafael Nadal the past three years.

"You do forget about it right away if you win Wimbledon the following month, you know," Federer said. "That kind of overshadows the French Open by a mile."

Part of that attitude stems from the prestige associated with the oldest of the Grand Slam tournaments. It began in 1877 on grass, and is still played that way. The tournament is evolving, however, and two striking symbols are this year's alterations to Centre Court: As part of the project to add a full roof by 2009, the overhang ringing the top of the arena has been temporarily removed, which could make for windier conditions this fortnight; and a form of instant replay will make its Wimbledon debut.

Federer was against the electronic line-calling system when it first emerged, but he's become more open to it. Wouldn't it be fascinating to see him benefit from an overturned call

during a big match?

In last year's Wimbledon final, Federer beat Nadal, and they could reprise their number one vs. number two rivalry with a July 9 rematch.

Not that Nadal's thinking that far ahead.

"I'm not worried about Federer. I am worried about (Mardy) Fish right now," Nadal said Saturday, referring to the serve-and-volleying American he faces in the first round.

Nadal and number three Andy Roddick might be the only players who could present a shade of trouble to Federer.

"In order for me to be successful here, I have to beat him one time, and that's kind of the way you look at it," said Roddick, who lost to Federer in the 2003 semifinals and the 2004 and 2005 finals at the All England Club. "What are you going to do? You wake up, you work hard, you go after it again."

No one holds Federer's kind of sway over the women's draw, although when it comes to this major, Serena and Venus Williams often bring their best. Venus Williams was one of the loudest voices calling on the tournament to pay the women what the men get,

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PHOTO: INTERNET

World number one Roger Federer (seen here wearing luxury 'heritage' style bespoke kit by Nike at the All England Club) will be going for his fifth-straight title.