

## Ailton set for Germany return

AFP, Berlin

Brazilian striker Ailton, one of the most prolific scorers in Bundesliga history, is set for a return to Germany with newly promoted Hansa Rostock, Bild newspaper reported on Wednesday.

Hansa are in talks with the 34-year-old's current club, Serb champions Red Star Belgrade, about a transfer for a modest fee of up to 200,000 euros (270,000 dollars).

"When a player of this calibre is on the market, you have to be interested and I'm sure that he would adapt well to our new project, both on a sporting and human level," Hansa coach Frank Pagelsdorf told Bild newspaper.

The player's agent Falk Schade said: "Ailton wants to play in Germany again and he would be the ideal solution for Rostock."

Ailton scored 105 goals in 211 matches in the Bundesliga, mainly for Werder Bremen and Schalke 04.



PHOTO: AFP

Danny Allsopp of Melbourne Victory (L) is tackled by China's Sun Xiang during a friendly match in Hong Kong yesterday.

## Santana signs for Atletico

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian attacking midfielder Cleber Santana has joined Atletico Madrid from Santos, the Spanish team said Tuesday.

Santana has signed a three-year deal and is the sixth new recruit at Atletico this close season.

"Atletico Madrid have reached agreement with Cleber Santana (who has) signed for the next three seasons," the club said on its internet site.

"The 26-year-old will be presented in the next few days."

Santana joins other new recruits Luis Garcia from Liverpool, Uruguayan striker Diego Forlan from Villarreal, Italian goalkeeper Christian Abbiati from AC Milan, midfielder Raul Garcia from Osasuna and Sporting Braga's Brazilian striker Diego da Costa.

## Mavuba set to join Villarreal

AFP, Madrid

Bordeaux's France midfielder Rio Mavuba has agreed a five-year deal to join Villarreal, the Spanish club said Tuesday.

"Bordeaux, Villarreal and Rio Mavuba have come to an agreement for the transfer of the player to the yellows on a five year deal," Villarreal said on their website.

The 23-year-old added: "I don't speak Spanish very well, I can only say that I'm very happy."

Mavuba will cost between seven and eight million euros.

## China win game of three halves

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

China completed their Asian Cup warm-up with an uninspiring 1-0 win over Australian champions Melbourne Victory in bizarre conditions here on Wednesday.

Despite objections from Victory, the match was played in three periods of 30 minutes with free entrance for fans, although only a few hundred turned up.

"The rules change every five minutes. They want to make sure it's an exhibition match," said Victory chairman Geoff Lord before the game.

"It's changed four times since we've been here."

After a tepid start substitute Wang

Dong opened the scoring in the second period, heading in a corner from the highly rated Zheng Zhi.

The former Charlton Athletic man was China's most dangerous player, registering the first shot on target – a free-kick from distance after 24 minutes – and tormenting the Victory defence with a run and shot.

Victory goal keeper Michael Theoklitos was also tested by a Zheng shot on 46 minutes while Wang came close with an audacious effort from the halfway line towards the end.

China reached the final of the last regional showpiece but have failed to build on their success, dropping nearly 30 places in the FIFA rankings and failing to reach last year's World Cup.

They open their campaign against co-hosts Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur on July 10.

Guanghu, who has been threatened with the sack, was unwilling to risk losing a full match just days before the Asian Cup.

But the unconvincing result is unlikely to alleviate pressure on Zhu, who has been told by officials to reach the semi-finals "or else."

The match completes an unorthodox Asian Cup preparation for China, who fielded players from Hong Kong in Sunday's Reunification Cup victory over an ageing FIFA World Stars team.

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Negotiations with Paris St Germain for another left back Sylvain Armand, have died, though, after PSG president Alain Cayzac claimed that the player will stay in the French capital.

## Crespo scare for Argentina

AP, Maracaibo

Argentina forward Hernan Crespo is likely to miss the rest of the Copa America after pulling a muscle in his right leg during a 4-2 win over Colombia.

"It's very difficult for Hernan to play again in this tournament," Homero de Agostino, Argentina's team doctor, said Tuesday.

Crespo left Monday's match limping on his right leg, immediately after converting Argentina's first goal, a penalty kick in the 20th minute.

"I felt the sharp pain as soon as I jumped to celebrate the goal," Crespo said. "I'm angry, of course, but I know the rest of the guys can achieve our goal of winning the tournament."

Crespo's three goals put him in a four-way tie for the tournament scoring lead with Brazil's Robinho and Paraguay's Roque Santa Cruz and Salvador Cabanas.

Carlos Tevez, who scored as a second-half sub in Argentina's opening 4-1 rout of the United States, could take Crespo's spot in the line-up.

The 2003 Asian Player of the Year will also want to make amends for

## Mahdavikia Iran's 'magic carpet'

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Bull-shouldered Bundesliga winger Mehdi Mahdavikia can lay strong claim to being Iran's greatest ever player if he helps bring home the Asian Cup this year.

While the dynamic 29-year-old has never lacked personal accolades, he will be desperate finally to land a major trophy – and end Iran's 31-year wait for a fourth regional title.

A direct and incisive runner with a lethal right foot, Mahdavikia was instrumental in Iran's march to the 2004 semis and will cause the most jitters among Team Mell's opponents.

The 2003 Asian Player of the Year will also want to make amends for

Iran's disappointing World Cup, where they earned just one point in three games.

Mahdavikia, recently moved to Eintracht Frankfurt after a distinguished eight-year spell at Hamburg, may get his chance with new coach Amir Ghalenoei's revamped Iran.

With stalwarts Ali Daei and Yahya Golmohammadi retired, Mahdavikia will make up the experienced core along with fellow Bundesliga men Ali Karimi and Vahid Hashemian, and Bolton's Andranik Teymourian.

Iran will look to Mahdavikia to provide the spark, as when he orchestrated 2004's dramatic 4-3 quarterfinal win over South Korea.

Mahdavikia, known as 'der Teppich' (the carpet) at Hamburg for his magical ability to glide past opponents, Arabian Nights-style, had a hand in three of the goals, adding to his legend among

Iran's fans.

He had already achieved immortality at the 1998 World Cup by getting Iran's second in the 2-1 victory over the United States, thus sealing the most fabled result in the country's football history.

Mahdavikia, who started his career with Persepolis FC and was Asia's young player of the year in 1997, was also twice player of the season at Hamburg where he scored 29 goals in 223 Bundesliga appearances.

Known for his gentlemanly demeanour, the married father-of-one hit the headlines last year when it was revealed he had a second wife – an offence in Germany but not in Iran.

He has since called the move a "big mistake."

## Eriksson in City for talks

Football

AFP, Manchester

Former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson took a step closer to taking over as Manchester City manager after arriving in the city for talks with the club.

The Swede is the top target of new owner-in-waiting the former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

And that possibility seems to be growing by the day with Eriksson's arrival at the City of Manchester Stadium on Tuesday night.

"We will see tomorrow (Wednesday). I would prefer to speak tomorrow," said Eriksson.

Asked if he will be meeting representatives from City tomorrow, Eriksson added: "I think so. If you wait until tomorrow you will know everything."

With pre-season training starting Wednesday, Eriksson is expected to meet the players before being formally unveiled as the club's new manager this week.

It appears City can finally contemplate looking forward to next season after a summer of uncertainty, which has seen key players Joey Barton and Sylvain Distin leave the club.

Thaksin will take control of the club when his share-holding reaches 75 percent but the process has been slow.

He has steadily moved towards the required figure, with only minor shareholders still to sell.

However it is clear that, with the new Premier League campaign just weeks away, the club are desperate to have their new manager on board to get on with the business of building a squad.

With Eriksson poised to take charge, City have already been linked with a string of players and, with a significant transfer budget available, he will be hoping to act quickly to bring much-needed

quality to the club.

The Swede has been out of work since leaving the England job following last summer's World Cup in Germany.



Former England manager Sven Goran Eriksson (L) speaks with Manchester City chairman John Wardle at the club's Carrington training ground in Manchester yesterday.

8x3

8x2

8x3