



Mexico forward Nery Castillo (C) is in full flight as Paraguay defenders Jonathan Santana (L) and Julio Cesar Caceres try to contain him during their Copa America quarterfinal in Maturin on Sunday.

'Rivals underestimated us'

AFP, London



Chelsea paid the price of underestimating Sir Alex Ferguson and his squad by relinquishing their Premiership crown to Manchester United last season, the Red Devils' captain, Gary Neville, believes.

Neville, who is hopeful he will have recovered from ankle surgery in time to feature in his club's new-season opener against Reading at Old Trafford on August 12, said nobody had given United a chance of reclaiming the title, especially in light of the acrimonious departure of Ruud van Nistelrooy.

"Nobody thought Manchester United would win the Premier League last season," Neville admitted. "But they underestimated us. They underestimated the knowl-

edge and class of our manager.

"For two to three years we had been in suffering. At the start of the season we added Michael Carrick to our squad and lost Ruud van Nistelrooy. But Chelsea added Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack.

"But the manager knew what he was doing over a period of two years in building a new team and now we are in a fantastic position.

"Last season we played the best football, the most attacking and entertaining football - and we deserved to win the trophy.

"I don't think a United fan could ever be as excited about the players, the team and about the way the club is, as today."

United were Monday set to unveil their major summer signing, the England midfielder Owen Hargreaves.

Ferguson has also acquired the

services of Brazilian midfielder Anderson and Portuguese winger Nani and is hoping to tie up a deal to allow Argentina striker Carlos Tevez to move from West Ham to Old Trafford.

Tevez wants the move to go through but it is currently being obstructed by uncertainty over who actually holds the rights to the player -- West Ham or the consortium that previously owned his registration and brought him to England.

Neville meanwhile is determined to put the injury woes that forced him to sit out United's title run-in behind him.

"I had an operation on my ankle about five to six weeks ago," he said. "I have been training really hard and feeling really strong and hoping I am fit for the start of the season because I am longing to play."

Carragher set to quit England

AFP, London

Liverpool centreback Jamie Carragher is on the brink of quitting international football in frustration at being regarded as a fringe squad player by England coach Steve McClaren.

The defender has been outstanding for his club in the Premiership and Champions League over the last two seasons, but he is not even first reserve with England, a fact that was highlighted last month when, with Rio Ferdinand injured, Ledley King started ahead of him in a key Euro 2008 qualifier in Estonia.

Carragher, 29, has also grown frustrated at being used as a stand-in left or right-back rather than in his preferred role in the middle, where Ferdinand and captain John Terry form McClaren's first-choice partnership.

"There are a number of reasons why I've been thinking about this (international retirement)," Carragher told Monday's edition of the Liverpool Echo.

"I first thought about it after the World Cup because I wondered how many chances I'd get for England at centre half.

"Then when Sol Campbell was out of the picture I thought I could put pressure on Rio Ferdinand for the other centre half position alongside John Terry.

"Given my form for Liverpool, I genuinely thought that was possible, but over the last 12 months players like Jonathan Woodgate and Ledley King have played there ahead of me.

"I can't really argue with that because they're top drawer players. It's not as if they're Mickey Mouse defenders.

"Even in the last two games against Brazil and Estonia, England conceded just one goal, so people can argue the manager got his decision spot on.

"It's just that from a purely personal point of view, it's been disappointing because after some of my performances for Liverpool I thought I deserved a chance.

Real's teutonic turn

AFP, Madrid



The last time Real Madrid opted for the teutonic touch by selecting a German coach the choice brought consequences typical for the club - silverware and a quick push through the door.

New choice Bernd Schuster will hope to stay around for longer than Jupp Heynckes, who won the Champions League in his one season in charge in 1998.

Since then the managerial merry-go-round has turned at dizzying speed with the likes of Vicente Del Bosque and, last month, Fabio Capello getting the sack after winning trophies of their own at the Bernabeu.

Schuster, 47, has yet to win a top honour as a coach - but he is the man to whom Real, where he starred in the late 1980s as a player, turned Monday.

"This is a great opportunity and a great day," said Schuster as club president Ramon Calderon presented him to the media by describ-

ing him as "one of the most brilliant players the club ever had."

Now the German must brace himself for his toughest coaching challenge in the most scalding of hotseats.

As a player Schuster was a precocious talent at Cologne, where he blossomed under legendary coach Hennes Weisweiler and soon made the full German squad, with whom he won the 1980 European Championship.

But, showing a petulant streak, he fell out with the German Football Association (DFB) and coach Jupp Derwall and quit the national side aged just 24 having won 21 caps, missing out on ever playing at the World Cup.

Even more staggering was Schuster's subsequent career in Spain.

He joined Barcelona in 1980 and stayed for eight years, scoring 63 goals in 170 appearances, winning a championship and three Cups and overcoming a 1981 knee injury inflicted by "butcher of Bilbao" Andoni Goikoetxea to star on a conveyor belt of talent including Diego Maradona and Gary Lineker.

But in 1988 he shocked the

Catalans - and the rest of Spain - by heading to, of all places, Real Madrid.

In those days, crossing that particular sporting divide was almost unheard of - although nobody threw a pig's head at him, as was Luis Figo's fate after he made the same journey a decade later.

Schuster stayed at the Bernabeu just two seasons, both title-winning ones, scoring 13 goals in 62 games. He then crossed the city in 1990 to join Atletico Madrid, before three years later moving back to Germany after a 13-year-absence for three seasons in Bayer Leverkusen's colours.

Despite some spectacular goals the spell was not successful and in 1997 Schuster brought the final curtain down on his playing career with UNAM Pumas in Mexico before gaining his coaching badges.

He took charge at second division German side Fortuna Cologne in 1997 and a year later briefly took the reins at his old club FC Cologne, just relegated.

Schuster left in 1999, then joined Spanish second division side Xerez in 2001.

Promotion proved elusive and that meant a detour to Ukraine's

Shakhtar Donetsk, where a failed title campaign brought the sack days before the team lifted the national cup.

In 2004 Schuster was fired again from Levante as the eastern Spanish side slid into division two, though they were just outside the drop zone when he left.

A year later he came to Getafe and after a season of consolidation the club last season flirted with the top six despite a budget some 30 times smaller than Real's 350 million euro pot of gold.

Given Getafe's lack of cash it may be noted the club's address is Avenida Teresa de Calcuta.

There was no pleading poverty, however, when the 17,000 capacity Coliseum Alfonso Perez witnessed a 4-0 destruction of mighty Barcelona in the second leg of the Spanish Cup semifinal, a result overturning a 5-2 first-leg deficit.

Despite the ultimate final loss to Sevilla, Marca sports daily described Schuster last season as a "guarantor of good football" and the epithet expresses just what Real say they are looking for.

Heat saps Soccerroos

AFP, Bangkok



Australia is grappling with how to play its best football in the sapping Asian Cup heat as their star names described the conditions as the toughest they have ever encountered.

The Soccerroos were accentuating the positives here Monday of getting out of their tournament opener with a 1-1 draw against Oman after looking condemned to a humbling defeat until Tim Cahill's stoppage time intervention.

The Bangkok heat, hovering around 34 Celsius (93F) at game time, drained the Aussies and left

them with the conundrum of how to best utilise their energy levels for their remaining Group A matches with Iraq and co-hosts Thailand.

Coach Graham Arnold was critical of the slow tempo his players employed to start the match, wary of the heat's debilitating effects and conserving energy.

"We needed to start with a quick tempo. If you start with a slow tempo then you give the opponent confidence," he said.

"That allowed Oman to dictate terms which wasn't what I wanted the players to do."

The opinion in the Australian camp a day after their great escape was that the Soccerroos had to impose themselves more on their lower-ranked opponents and not allow the conditions to become a

mental barrier.

"We need to play cleverer football, we've had discussions after the game," Schwarzer said Monday.

"I don't think we helped ourselves last night and we didn't play to our own strengths and I think we need to work on that and make sure that we make the opposition do most of the running and chase us.

"If we can play to our strengths and maximise our condition and make them do the running then I think we can play at a higher tempo for longer."

The Australians described Sunday's match conditions as horrendous.

"It was the hardest game conditions-wise that I've ever played in, it was physically and mentally drain-

ing. It was hot," West Ham defender Lucas Neill said.

Torino midfielder Vince Grella said: "It's hard to play in these conditions and maybe we should look to keeping the ball a little bit and building up play a little slower when we've got the ball."

Middlesbrough goalkeeper Schwarzer, one of Australia's few stand-outs, revealed he lost three kilograms on Sunday.

"I lost three kilos and most of that was during the warm-up and I had to back off the warm-up because it was so harsh," he said.

"You look at Brett Emerton, Vince Grella and Jason Culina, who are the workhorses of the team and can run all day, and they were feeling the pinch as much as everyone else.