



(From L-R) Brazil right-back Daniel Alves (top) is carried by striker Vagner Love after the defender scored a stunning goal to round off a comprehensive victory. The scoreboard says it all and a dejected Juan Roman Riquelme can only stand with his hands on his hips as the favoured Argentines crash to another final calamity in the Copa America final at the Pachenco Romero stadium in Maracaibo on Sunday.

Pragmatism beats romanticism

TIM VICKERY



The romanticists met the pragmatists in the final of the Copa America. Brazil's 3-0 win means that it was a resounding triumph for the pragmatists. Argentina coach Alfio Basile says again and again that he is not simply interested in winning - it matters to him how the victory is achieved. His critics would argue that he favours 1940s football, but all the way through the tournament right up until the final his side were looking good value in the 21st century.

Their patient passing game was a joy to watch, tiring the opponents and then turning on the talent in the second half.

But it failed to spark against Brazil. And it didn't work for the very reasons that led to Brazil abandoning such a style in the 1980s.

Argentina were outdone because they were unable to cope with the physical power and the speed on the counter-attack of the Brazilian side - weapons that were used against Brazil in the past, but now work firmly in their favour.

Brazilian football was thrown into confusion by the great Holland side of 1974. The Dutch are remembered for their constant inter-changing of positions, but they also put enormous pressure on the opposition when they

wanted the ball back.

Brazil tried to copy them in 1978 and when that didn't work, they tried to turn the clock back under their last romantic coach, Tele Santana, in 1982 and 1986.

The failure of Santana's side left deep scars. Current coach Dunga has referred to them as "specialists in losing."

The conclusion was drawn that the physical and tactical development of the game made it much more difficult for a team to play its way through packed defences as Brazil had done in the past.

Scared of the physical strength of the Europeans, the Brazilians set out to match it. Nowadays they claim their physical preparation specialists are the best in the world. Brazilian players have become

bigger and stronger.

When they finally faced Germany in a World Cup match, in the 2002 final, they did so at no physical disadvantage. On Sunday in Maracaibo they won the key 50-50 balls, especially the one in which Julio Baptista was able to free Daniel Alves to cross for the vital second goal.

Brazil's players have been built for explosion and the style of play reflected this. Quick breaks replaced the intricate passing moves of old.

Brazil had five shots to Argentina's eight and lost the corner count eight to four, but they won the game because the pace of their counter-attack was too much

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Recoba quits int'l football

INTERNET, undated

Alvaro Recoba has retired from international football after missing the Third Place Final of the Copa America with injury.

The Inter enigma announced his decision after Uruguay's 3-1 defeat to Mexico, a match he was unable to play in.

Managing just 12 goals in 58 appearances for his country, 'El Chino' has seen his career at international and club level blighted by injury and inconsistency.

This season he played only 18 official games for Inter in all competition and there were reports he would retire at the age of 31.

However, he seems set to remain with the Nerazzurri for his 11th campaign.

Recoba moved to Italy in 1998 from Nacional Montevideo and had a brief six-month loan spell at Venezia, almost single-handedly rescuing them from relegation with 10 goals in 19 matches.

O'Grady's tour over

AFP, Tignes

Australian Stuart O'Grady escaped serious spinal injuries, according to hospital officials who treated him after a crash in the eighth stage of the Tour de France on Sunday.

O'Grady's Tour ended when he crashed on the descent of the Cornet de Roselend climb, which took a costly toll on the peloton.

After being put on a special stretcher, used in case of eventual spinal injuries, he was taken immediately to hospital in nearby Moutiers where he underwent X-rays and was undergoing an MRI scan.

According to hospital officials O'Grady suffered fractures on five of his front ribs, three fractures in his back lower ribs, a punctured lung and a shoulder fracture.

X-rays and an MRI scan ruled out any spinal damage.

Earlier, his compatriot Michael Rogers, of T-Mobile, was left with hand, knee and shoulder injuries after a crash near the bottom of the descent. He was also forced out of the race.

Rogers was in the virtual yellow jersey and travelling in excess of 60km/h when a sudden braking manoeuvre brought him down on a left hand bend.

He was later diagnosed with a dislocated shoulder.

The Canberran later returned to the team hotel, where he was left lamenting what was a great chance to take control of the race.

"It's a real shame because I could see the yellow jersey," he said.

"One moment I was in the lead, the next I was lying on the ground with my back wheel where my front wheel should have been.

"But honestly, I can't complain because that's cycling."

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PHOTO: AFP

New buys delight Casillas

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid, who pipped Barcelona at the wire for their first title in four seasons, have laid down solid foundations for the future with a clutch of top summer signings, goalkeeper Iker Casillas says.

"The club has made some great signings. That's what we had to do, build the house from the foundation up," the Spanish international keeper told As in allusion to a vastly-remodeled squad following the departures of veterans such as David Beckham and Roberto Carlos.

German coach and former Real -- and Barcelona -- star Bernd Schuster has also arrived from modest Madrid suburbs side Getafe after carving out a reputation as an ambitious manager who puts a premium on entertaining football.

The more austere style of title-winning predecessor Fabio Capello earned the Italian the sack.

Real have spent 30 million euros (40 million dollars) on Brazilian defender Pepe, and have also brought in German defender Christoph Metzelder and mercurial Argentine striker Javier Saviola, who arrives on a free transfer from Barcelona.

Marca magazine said Monday

the club also wanted Ajax star Wesley Sneijder.

Casillas, who has twice won the Champions League with Real and has made more than 250 league appearances since breaking in the side as a teenager, himself has to keep on his toes after Liverpool keeper Jerzy Dudek said Real had made him an offer.

Dudek secured European glory of his own with the Anfield giants in 2005 before losing his place as coach Rafael Benitez preferred Spaniard Pepe Reina.

Now 34, the Pole should provide cover but Casillas, still only 26, is on his mettle.

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Henry unties the knot

AFP, London

French striker Thierry Henry has split with his wife of four years, his lawyers said in a statement released late on Sunday.

The Barcelona star, 29, who transferred to the club from London side Arsenal last month, had married English model Claire -- also known in the modelling industry as Nicole Merry -- in July 2003, and the pair have a two-year-old daughter, Tea.

"Thierry is extremely saddened by the breakdown of his marriage," the statement from law firm Mishcon de Reya on behalf of Henry read.

"He is anxious to move on with his life and maintain the best possible relationship he can with Claire for the benefit of their daughter Tea, whom he loves very much.

"Thierry would like to stress that

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Torres set for Reds debut

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool's record 20 million pound signing Fernando Torres is set to make his debut for his new club in a pre-season friendly in Switzerland on Tuesday.

The former Atletico Madrid striker, who has moved to Anfield on a six-year contract, is expected to shake off a slight ankle injury and face Werder Bremen in Grenchen.

Manager Rafael Benitez said on Monday: "We had to wait for Fernando because he started training after the other players.

"We also needed to check his ankle but I think he'll be okay for our next game."

Torres could link up with former Bayer Leverkusen striker Andriy Voronin. The Ukrainian marked his first start of the club with a fine display in the defeat of Crewe on Saturday in a friendly.

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Barca's off-loading problem

INTERNET, undated



Barcelona have captured the headlines around Planet Football in the past month with their audacious signings of Thierry Henry, Yaya Toure, Eric

Abidal and - last but by no means least - Gabriel Milito. Barca have spent almost 70 million euros

(96.52 million dollars) on this talented quartet who will, it is hoped, rejuvenate a squad which has grown old, flabby and complacent after years of success.

Now the Catalan giants are faced with the Herculean task of offloading all the players no longer wanted by coach Frank Rijkaard.

So far, the only players to leave have been Giovanni Van Bronckhorst and Javier Saviola, but their departures have, in effect, created more problems than solutions.

Rijkaard wanted to keep Van Bronckhorst as experienced cover for Abidal but the veteran Dutchman insisted on signing for Feyenoord.

It is true that Barca wanted to be rid of Saviola - but the last thing they wanted was him signing for Real Madrid.

The decision to let the little Argentine go without a fee could well come back to haunt the Catalans, in the shape of crucial goals for Real.

The main problem now for Barca sporting director Txiki Begiristain is that most of the unwanted players are very comfortable at the Camp Nou, picking up high salaries in a beautiful city for turning up to training then sitting on the sub's bench - or up in the stands.

Take, for example, the case of Thiago Motta, who only made five league appearances last seasons. He earns around two million euros (2.76 million dollars) per season at Barca, and is obviously reluctant to join a club who will pay him less.

Motta is perfectly content to sit on the Barca bench for another season. His contract finishes in June 2008, then he can negotiate with any club of his choice as a free agent, without the obstacle of a transfer fee.

"It's going to be really difficult," Begiristain told Sport at the weekend, "to find a new club for all the players that we would like to move on."

Ludovic Giuly is in a similar position to Motta. Monaco and Roma are both interested in him, but he would have to accept a wage cut if he joined either of those clubs.

The same could be said about Juliano Belletti, Sylvinho, Santi Ezquerro and Eidur Gudjohnsen: Why should they accept any move that Begiristain arranges for them, if it means that they will end up out of pocket?

It certainly looks like being a long, hot, hectic summer for poor Begiristain.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazil forward Robinho holds up the player-of-the-tournament trophy during the awards ceremony following their victory over Argentina in the Copa America final at the Pachenco Romero stadium in Maracaibo on Sunday.

FED CUP

Italy set up Russia final

AFP, Castellana Marina

Defending champions Italy defied 40-degree temperatures to come back from 2-1 down to beat France 3-2 and reach the Fed Cup final on Sunday.

The Italians will play Russia, who defeated the United States 3-2 in the second semifinal, which also came down to the final doubles rubber.

Francesca Schiavone, who remained unbeaten throughout the weekend, teamed up with Roberta Vinci in the crucial doubles to see off Nathalie Dechy and Severine Bremond 4-6, 6-1, 6-2.

Italy will now face Russia, who beat the USA 3-2, in the September

15-16 final.

France were left kicking themselves after throwing away a golden chance to wrap up the semifinal.

Amelie Mauresmo beat Mara Santangelo 6-7 (5/7), 6-0, 6-4 in Sunday's opening singles before Tatiana Golovin threw away a 5-2 final set lead to crumble to a 6-4, 2-6, 7-5 defeat against Schiavone in the second singles rubber of the day.

Golovin gave France their first point of the tie when she beat Tathiana Garbin 6-3, 2-6, 6-2 in Saturday's opening rubber before the home side hit back when Schiavone beat Mauresmo in straightsets.

On Sunday, Santangelo gave it her best in the first set against Mauresmo immediately putting the

former world number one on her back foot, who only took the lead in the seventh game at 4-3 converting the first break of the match.

However the French number one failed to keep her nose in front and eventually lost the tie-break despite winning the first five points.

Following an obligatory ten-minute break due to the searing heat, Mauresmo got off to a bad start in the third set but recovered well to take the rubber.

In Stowe, Vermont, Nadia Petrova and Elena Vesnina overcame doubles standout Lisa Raymond and Wimbledon champion Venus Williams 7-5, 7-6 (7/1) to secure Russia's place in the final.

Williams was a last-minute addition in the do-or-die doubles,

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PHOTO: INTERNET

Russia's Nadia Petrova (R) and Elena Vesnina celebrate their doubles victory over USA in the semifinal of the Fed Cup in Stowe on Sunday.