

Cesc comes of age

AFP, London



When Cesc Fabregas picked himself up from the sodden Highbury turf and nursed bruises to his leg and his ego, the Arsenal midfielder knew it was time to come of age.

Fabregas had just been on the receiving end of a fierce tackle by former teammate Patrick Vieira in the opening moments of a crucial Champions League match.

Vieira would have known better than anyone that Fabregas's sublime passing could overwhelm Juventus if he was given the time to express himself, so he tried to ruffle a player not renowned for his physical power.

But Fabregas refused to be intimidated. There was not the slightest sign of deference to the man he had replaced in the Arsenal engine room as the Spaniard got to his feet and fixed Vieira with a steely glare.

The teenager had shown he was willing to fight for the cause and his match-winning performance was the final piece in the jigsaw.

On a stage where reputations are made and broken in the blink of an eye, he destroyed the Italian team, scoring one goal and creating the other. Vieira's departure would never be mourned again.

Fabregas has passed virtually every

test put before him since that night in March 2006 and, while Thierry Henry's departure to Barcelona may have deprived Arsenal of their talisman, it presents the youngster with the opportunity to become the club's new dominant force.

With Real Madrid making their interest in Fabregas all too obvious this close season, it would have been easy for him to follow in Henry's footsteps and move to Spain.

But ever since he decided to leave Barcelona's youth academy to try his luck with Arsenal, Fabregas has relished defying the odds.

After speaking to Wenger, he realised he owed it to the French coach and himself to help re-establish Arsenal as serious Premiership challengers.

Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool can all make more convincing cases about their title credentials and even former Gunner Freddie Ljungberg believes the club's time has passed after the departures of so many stars.

But Fabregas is adamant his side are strong enough to improve on two successive fourth place finishes.

"While I respect the opinions of Henry and Ljungberg, I believe this team can fight for the title," Fabregas said.

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Iraqi fans living in Jordan wait for the arrival of the Asian Cup champions at the Amman international airport on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi team hailed by Pope

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday congratulated Iraq for winning the Asian Cup football championship at the weekend, which he hailed as a "historic success".

"So often I have cried with the Iraqis; in this case I rejoice with them," the pope said.

The "good news about Iraq ... generated a popular explosion of joy in the entire country," Benedict said at the end of his weekly general audience.

"I was happily impressed with the enthusiasm that seized all the people, prompting them to take to the streets to celebrate," the 80-year-old German pope said.

"This experience of shared happiness revealed the desire of a people for a normal and serene life. I hope the event will contribute to the achievement in Iraq ... of a future with true peace, in freedom and reciprocal respect," Benedict said. "Congratulations!"

Iraq erupted in joy and celebratory gunfire on Sunday after the Asian Cup victory united its bitterly divided communities in a rare moment of celebration.

However, celebrations following last week's semi-final victory against South Korea were shattered by two car bomb attacks that killed 50 people.

Rossi joins Villarreal

AFP, Manchester

Spanish side Villarreal's penchant for Manchester United's unwanted strikers continued on Tuesday as they signed Italian Under-21 international Giuseppe Rossi for 6.7million pounds.

The 20-year-old American-born hitman - who will sign subject to a medical - will replace another United misfit Diego Forlan at the 2006 Champions League semi-finalists - the Uruguayan having moved to Atletico Madrid for 14million pounds.

Rossi, who scored four times in 14 senior appearances for United since he joined them aged 16, starred in a loan spell for Serie A outfit Parma last term and his nine goals in 17 matches played a large part in saving the former Cup Winners Cup and UEFA Cup winners place among the Italian elite.

Parma were keen to sign him on a permanent basis but only came up with a 5.4million pounds bid which was trumped by Villarreal for a player that was hailed by United manager Sir Alex Ferguson as 'the future of the club' last summer when he signed a new contract which would have kept him with the 'Red Devils' till 2010.

Ironically, Rossi's last start for United was in the final game of the 2005-06 campaign, when he was preferred to Ruud van Nistelrooy, a decision which effectively ended the Dutchman's Old Trafford career and saw him also depart for Spain to Real Madrid.

Spotlight on C'Ron

AFP, London



As Cristiano Ronaldo shielded his eyes from the blinding explosion of flashbulbs it was clear the Manchester United winger's transition from pride of Old Trafford to global phenomenon was complete.

After a magnificent season in which his dazzling array of feints and flicks bewitched defenders and fans in equal measure, Ronaldo has become one of the game's new icons.

The 22-year-old's brilliant form was instrumental in United winning their first Premiership title for four years and he was rightly showered with plaudits and awards.

But now he faces a challenge that will define his career. Every move he made during United's recent pre-season tour of Asia was followed by legions of fans and photographers desperate to catch a glimpse of him.

So much attention would sit uneasily for many. At best it could be seen as an unwanted but necessary evil, but it would be no surprise if sudden elevation to such a rarefied celebrity status had a more corrosive effect.

The road to football's pantheon of greats is littered with tales of stars who fell by the wayside after succumbing to the temptations that

can so easily corrupt a young talent.

Ronaldo only has to look back at his predecessors in the United number seven shirt to see how easy it is to be distracted by the bright lights.

George Best lost his passion for the game far too young and Sir Alex Ferguson gave up on David Beckham after becoming convinced he was spending more time working on his image than his free kicks.

Happily for Ferguson, his latest prodigy shows signs that his feet will remain firmly on the ground despite the hype declaring him the best player on the planet.

"How players manage to handle that celeb-kind of attention we will never know," Ferguson said. "But with Ronaldo he seems to do OK. He seems to be fine and does not seem to be overwhelmed or overly flattered by it.

"The problem comes when players get flattered by it and start to enjoy it, that is when you start worrying.

"It is obvious when a talent like Ronaldo comes along that there will be attention. This club is great at creating heroes no question about that.

"With Cristiano, a lot has happened to him in his time at Manchester United. But he is an intelligent boy and looks after himself. He has matured fantasti-

cally well."

That maturity was visible in the admirable way Ronaldo coped with the taunts from opposing fans that followed him around the Premiership in the aftermath of his role in Wayne Rooney's World Cup dismissal last year.

For a while after his 12million pounds move to United from Sporting Lisbon in 2003, Ronaldo was in danger of becoming a flat-track bully, who could humiliate inferior opponents but struggled against the best.

His heroics last season erased most of those doubts, but he is still not the finished article.

Lacklustre displays in the Champions League semi-final second leg against AC Milan and the FA Cup final against Chelsea were crucial to United's defeats in those matches.

If Ronaldo has suffered occasional stage-fright, Ferguson sees no reason why it will inhibit him for long. He has time, talent and buckets of confidence on his side, as the United boss knows so well.

Ronaldo has offered to shave his hair off if he doesn't hit 20 league goals this season - as long as Ferguson shaves his own thatch off if Ronaldo reaches the mark.

A shrewd operator like Ferguson may just think the gamble is worth taking if it guarantees Ronaldo's star remains in the ascendant.

Tevez's date in court

AFP, London

Carlos Tevez is expected to give evidence when his long-running transfer saga reaches the High Court on August 22.

Tevez has been confirmed as a witness in the dispute, which was fast-tracked for an early hearing after the Argentine's representatives, Media Sports Investments (MSI) and Just Sports Inc, applied for an interim injunction.

The injunction would mean Tevez could join Manchester United from West Ham immediately, while the financial elements of the row would then be resolved at a later trial.

Kia Joorabchian, who owns MSI and Just Sports Inc, is suing West

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Zidane refuses Materazzi

AFP, Berlin

Italy defender Marco Materazzi says he has tried several times to arrange a meeting with Zinedine Zidane, but the Frenchman who headbutted him in the 2006 World Cup final has always refused to meet him.

"I am at peace with myself. I have tried several times to meet Zidane to put all that behind us, but he has refused. That's his problem," Materazzi said in an interview with Germany's Sport Bild magazine published on Wednesday.

Zidane was sent off following the headbutt to Materazzi's chest at Berlin's Olympic Stadium last July. The Frenchman claimed the Italian had taunted him and made crude remarks about his family.

Materazzi said: "It's clear that many people see me as the aggressor, but like Zidane I was punished

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Female support pleases Toni

AFP, Berlin

Italian striker Luca Toni says he's enjoying life at Bayern Munich, especially the tradition of allowing fans to watch the team training.

He said: "The main difference between Germany and Italy is that the training sessions are up to now open to the public. I find that very positive and we should change this tradition in Italy where everything takes place behind closed doors."

"I'm really happy that the female sex turns up for training, it's very good that women are there when we train," Toni, who is dating model Marta Cecchetto, added in an interview with Wednesday's Die Welt newspaper.

The 30-year-old World Cup winner arrived from Serie A side Fiorentina on a 12million euro deal and he claimed his objective in the Bundesliga was to be liked rather than to be a star.

"I joined Bayern to score goals. At Palermo and Fiorentina I scored goals and they liked me for that."

Since joining Bayern Toni has

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Schuster relieved



Football

AFP, Hanover

Real Madrid's new coach Bernd Schuster expressed relief on Tuesday the Spanish giants have lost their star players - Los Galacticos - and can concentrate on being a European force again.

The 47-year-old German took over as Real Madrid coach in July and has been busy making changes behind the scenes now Real have waved goodbye to star players England's David Beckham, France's Zinedine Zidane and Brazil's Ronaldo.

Despite a side boasting some of Europe's best footballers, Real went three seasons without winning the Spanish title before Schuster's predecessor Italian

Fabio Capello guided them to top spot last season - though he was sacked shortly afterwards.

The German is keen to build on that and has been making some no-nonsense changes behind the scenes: checking the players' diets and insisting senior players room with younger players while away.

"Defeat is not something often seen at Real," Schuster told German magazine Sports-Bild.

"The club is swarming with world-class players. Nevertheless the Galacticos like David Beckham, Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo have gone - thank God.

"I have felt in conversations with key people that the side's high-profile reputation hindered them, so I am glad a sense of normality has returned, as well it should be."

But Schuster's homecoming was spoiled on Tuesday night as he lost his

first game back in Germany when a weakened Real Madrid side were beaten 3-0 by Bundesliga side Hanover 96.

Having led 1-0 at the break in front of a 45,683-strong crowd thanks to Hungarian Szabolcs Huszti's goal on the half-hour mark, Hanover wrapped up the comfortable win with second-half goals by Icelandic striker Gunnar Heidar Thorvaldsson and a Benny Lauth strike with eight minutes remaining.

It was a weakened Real side with strikers Ruud van Nistelrooy and Brazilian Robinho - who was impressive in the Copa America - nowhere to be seen.

Hanover opens their Bundesliga campaign against Hamburg on August 11.

Nesta quits Azzurri



Football

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan's Italy defender Alessandro Nesta has retired from international football, he told a news conference on Wednesday.

Nesta has decided to end his international career after winning 78 caps.

"I'm not going to play for the national side anymore. My adventure in blue finishes here," Nesta said.

The 31-year-old, who has 78 caps, played in three World Cups but his Italy career has recently been dogged by injuries.

Nesta follows Roma's Francesco Totti, who made a similar decision last month, in choosing to concentrate on club commitments.

In May Nesta signed a new deal with Milan taking his contract up to 2011.

Nesta was forced to miss last July's World Cup final victory over France because of a groin injury and has only featured once for Italy since October's 3-1 Group B victory against Georgia in a

2008

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ALESSANDRO NESTA

'Stupid not to spend sooner'

AFP, Munich



millions to assemble Bavaria's dream team sooner.

Bayern reacted furiously to last season's fourth place in the Bundesliga - and missing out on a Champions League place - by splashing out 69million euros to bolster their side for the rapidly approaching new season.

Players of the calibre of French midfielder Franck Ribery, Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni and

German striker Miroslav Klose, the top scorer at last year's World Cup, were brought to Munich to launch the hunt for silverware.

Bayern claimed the first trophy of the season when they won the German League Cup in Leipzig last weekend with a 1-0 win over Schalke 04 and Hoeness told German on-line magazine Stern he wished he'd spent sooner.

"During the League Cup last week I was thinking to myself about how stupid I was for not spending the money sooner," he said.

"I look back now and remember how angry I was at times last season compared to how much I enjoy watching football now. We should have done this a lot sooner.

"It would have improved my own quality of life," he added after watch-

ing France midfielder Franck Ribery, who cost Bayern 26million euros; score three goals in two League Cup matches.

Hoeness said good business sense goes out the window in football, where fans and club's board members want to see spectacular results, whatever the cost.

"The people don't want a serious businessman anymore who makes sure the books are in good order. They would rather see the spectacular. They want big names; they want entertainment.

"For a lot of people it doesn't matter if we make a profit or lose money. It's only important that the team play attractive football.

"But that scares me a bit too because if that is the long term policy, that's dangerous."



PHOTO: INTERNET

Real Madrid captain Raul (R) hurls himself between three Hanover 96 players during a friendly match in Hanover on Tuesday.