



Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard takes questions from journalists during a press conference in Hong Kong yesterday.

Frank defends Barca tour

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard defended the team's Far East pre-season tour when the team arrived in Hong Kong here on Wednesday.

Barcelona defenders Gianluca Zambrotta and Lilian Thuram have criticised the tour, saying it will hamper training for the Spanish championship that kicks off on August 25.

But Rijkaard disagreed. "We are all aware that we have to build up our preparation plan and are going on travel and are far away from home which is not an ideal situation," he said at the pre-match press conference.

"But we are a good team with good players and we play with good spirit," he said, adding that the team had won some important games on the road.

"It can't be an excuse that we

cannot prepare well. We won't complain about travelling because it is our job and we have to do the best with our best possible players," he said.

The Dutchman said Barcelona were bringing a strong squad to Hong Kong for the final friendly match of their three-match tour, missing only three players who played in the recent Copa America.

New signing Thierry Henry and his partners up front -- new sensation Giovanni Dos Santos, three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o and Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho -- are with the star-studded squad.

Former Arsenal star Henry has been used on the flanks during the tour rather than as an out-and-out striker but Rijkaard praised the performance of the France international.

"His form is fine and he is adjusting himself well in a new team," said the coach. "He can give great contribution to Barcelona once he has

fitted into the team."

Despite the arrival of the marksman and other new players, Rijkaard did not spell out exactly what the target was this season.

"It will be an exciting season with many wonderful players."

Ronaldinho said the Champions League would be Barcelona's prime target in the new season as well as the Spanish title. "We are confident of doing well and the pre-season tour will definitely help us," he said.

With two typhoons approaching Hong Kong, the match on Friday night against a Mission Hills Invitation XI, a squad made up of players from Kitchee FC and Happy Valley FC, may be postponed.

A fallback date on Saturday has been scheduled, according to match organiser Ken Ng Kin.

Bayern aim to dominate

AFP, Berlin



expected to line up alongside talented Bastian Schweinsteiger and Dutch hardman Mark van Bommel, forming a trio with the potential to develop into a formidable midfield.

Defensive midfielder Owen Hargreaves was granted his long-awaited transfer to Manchester United while strikers Roque Santa Cruz and Claudio Pizarro have also left for the English Premiership.

Question marks remain however over a defence that conceded 40 goals last year with no major reinforcements except Marcell Jansen, who is nursing an injury.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said that while the club had undertaken the most expensive recruitment campaign in Bundesliga history, he could not guarantee success.

"That is the goal, but I cannot guarantee to win the title," Hitzfeld told Kickers magazine.

Bayern will also have to suffer the humiliation of sitting and watching as the continent's best teams do battle in the Champions League -

the four-time European champions have only qualified for the UEFA Cup.

Newly promoted Hansa Rostock will be the first visitors to the Allianz Arena. They are on a high after destroying their amateur opponents 8-0 in Saturday's German Cup first round win.

Defending champions VfB Stuttgart start the 2007-2008 campaign on Friday when they host last season's runners-up Schalke 04.

In contrast to Bayern, Stuttgart have had a quiet build-up to the new season.

They were beaten by Bayern Munich in the German League Cup semi-final in pre-season and will be looking to emulate last term when they saw off the challenge of Schalke, Werder Bremen and Bayern.

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'Rooney can make difference'

Football

AFP, London

Steve McClaren believes a revitalised Wayne Rooney can provide the spark to help England avoid Euro 2008 embarrassment.

Rooney has enjoyed an impressive pre-season after a much-needed rest and England coach McClaren sees signs that the Manchester United striker is about to take his game to a new level.

It is vital for McClaren that Rooney is firing on all cylinders going into the crucial Euro 2008 qualifiers next month that will define his reign as England coach.

McClaren said: "It is great to see Wayne coming back from his break this summer in top form.

"I spoke to Sir Alex quite early on and he told me how fit Wayne was. He certainly looks very fit from what I have seen.

"It is his first full pre-season for a while as well, so you are bound to benefit from that."

"Speaking to Wayne, I know he is dying to get back into the England squad and he is going to be a big player for us."

If England are to avoid a humiliating failure to reach the finals they must win their home matches against Israel and Russia in September.

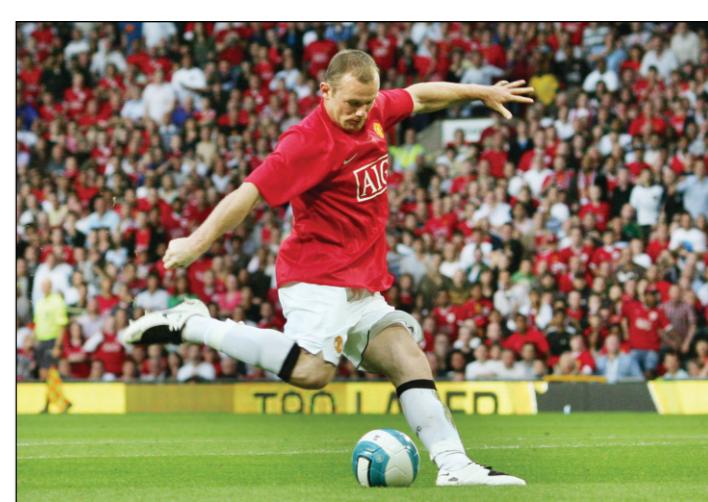
McClaren knows he would

after that period in March there was a definite reaction, which was reflected in the performances and results of the last three games.

"In times like that, it is about believing in ourselves, believing in what we were doing and what we were trying to achieve."

"It is about sticking to the preparation that we know and making sure we get the results. You are going to get bad times and adversity."

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WAYNE ROONEY

South Africa renames host cities

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's process of renaming towns and cities will not have a negative effect on the staging of the football World Cup in the country in 2010, officials said on Tuesday.

While the names of various host cities were being changed, they would be coupled with their former names for international purposes.

"We have agreed on the name changes proposed by various host cities, that they will be used in South Africa," Local Organising Committee (LOC) chairman, Irvin Khoza, told reporters here.

"But for international purpose it was important we use double-barrel names, a combination of both old and new names for the World Cup."

"We also agreed that both names will appear on tickets

issued for the tournament in 2010," Khoza added.

Of the 10 cities presented to FIFA to host the event, those affected by the process are Mangaung (Bloemfontein), Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth), and Tshwane (capital Pretoria).

FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke said the country would use the FIFA preliminary draw, to be held in the coastal city of Durban on November 25, to show the world its readiness.

"It (the draw) gives the world the first image of what will be the World Cup in South Africa. The world's eyes will be on South Africa."

He said preparations were "on track" although stadiums in Cape Town and Mandala Bay were running "a few weeks late".

"But we are confident they will be ready in time for the Confederation Cup in 2009," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sania Mirza of India hits a backhand against Martina Hingis of Switzerland during her match at the East West Bank Classic in Carson, California on Tuesday.

Gomez best in Bundesliga

AFP, Berlin

VfB Stuttgart striker Mario Gomez was on Wednesday voted Bundesliga player of the year for 2007 for propelling his club to the title with 14 goals last season.

The lanky Gomez, 22, polled 196 votes in the Kicker magazine poll of sports journalists to finish ahead of Werder Bremen's Brazilian star Diego, who received 175 votes, and German veteran Bernd Schneider of Bayer Leverkusen (156).

Stuttgart coach Armin Veh was an easy winner of the Coach of the Year award with 449 votes for leading his unfancied side to their first Bundesliga title for 15 years.

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