

Henry has a wish

Football

AFP, Madrid

When Thierry Henry decided to leave Arsenal to sign with Barcelona he followed in the footsteps of fellow French international Zinedine Zidane who also moved to Spain in the pursuit of Champions League glory.

Zidane was the same age - 29 - as Henry when he left Italian side Juventus to join Real Madrid in 2001 for a record 75 million euros (101 million US dollars) in the hopes of winning the only major trophy that had eluded him.

The former French number 10 got his wish during his first season with the Spanish giants.

Zidane, who had lost in two previous appearances in the final for Juventus, scored the winner in Real Madrid's 2-1 victory over Bayer Leverkusen at Glasgow's Hampden Park on May 15, 2002.

Now Henry, who was on the losing side for Arsenal against Barcelona in the 2006 Champions League final in Paris, makes no secret that he is looking to do the

same with the Catalan club.

"We (Arsenal) lost against Barcelona in the Champions League final. I could have done it over there, but now I'm here and I have to live and breathe for Barcelona," he said after signing with Barcelona for four years in June.

"It is a dream for everyone to win the Champions League and it's the only thing I haven't won yet, so I would love to win it," the striker added.

The champions League medal is the only major prize missing from Henry's trophy case. He won the World Cup in 1998 and the European title in 2000 with France as well as a slew of domestic honours with Arsenal.

The player, who turned 30 last week, almost joined Barcelona after Arsenal was defeated by Frank Rijkaard's team in Paris in 2006 but at the last minute he renewed with Arsenal.

But Barcelona continued to court Henry and, with uncertainty surrounding the continuation of Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, the French player, nicknamed "Titi", decided in June that the time was right to move to the Spanish side.

Henry, Arsenal's top scorer in four

of the five Premier League seasons between 2001-06, spent much of the last campaign sidelines with injuries but has rapidly found his place during the pre-season at Barcelona.

"He has enormous physical and technical qualities as well as speed," said Barcelona midfielder Xavi.

"It is a pleasure to count on him," Barcelona's Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o said during the club's pre-season tour of China and Japan.

"He is a friend, I know that already.

Titi is not at his best form, I would say he is at 80 to 90 percent, which is already very good given that he was injured for a long time," he added.

Henry made his goal-scoring debt for his new club during Barcelona's 1-0 win over Scottish Premier League side Dundee United during a friendly in July after coming on as a second-half substitute.

"It was just a friendly match but for me it was important," he said at the time, adding he felt like he had been with Barcelona for a long time.

Barcelona, who lost the Spanish league crown to Real Madrid last season, will face Racing Santander on Sunday in their first match of the new campaign.



PHOTO: AFP

GALLOPING GIANTS: Ghana's exciting midfielder Michael Essien (C) and Senegal's striker Hadji El Diouf (R) fight for the possession of the ball during their international friendly football match at the Den Stadium in East London on Tuesday. The match ended in a 1-1 draw.

Essien is from another planet: Le Roy

Football

AFP, London

Ghana coach Claude Le Roy believes his side can live up to their billing as favourites to win the African Nations Cup as long as Michael Essien stays fit.

Le Roy made Essien captain for his country's 1-1 friendly draw against Senegal in London on Tuesday and was rewarded with a typical lung-bursting display from the Chelsea midfielder.

Essien's performance was even more impressive considering he had played in Chelsea's Premier League match at Liverpool just 48 hours earlier.

"Michael is not a normal player, he is from another planet," Le Roy said. "I was telling him there is no player of his level anywhere in the world.

"It is unbelievable. He played on Sunday, came on Monday for training, he didn't ask me for a rest but I took him off before the end. I hope (Chelsea manager) Jose Mourinho is happy that I didn't play him for 90 minutes."

"With Michael in the team anything is possible."

Essien may be essential to Ghana but he was a reluctant captain as he stood in for the injured Stephen Appiah.

"When I called him from Ghana a few days ago he said 'are you sure you want me?' Then he said 'OK, for one game, then when they come back I will let them do it.' But he was a fantastic captain," Le Roy added.

Ghana are expected to put up a strong showing when they host the African Nations tournament in January and the French coach expects them to succeed with Essien at the heart of his side.

"We know it will be difficult and we will have to show a lot of sacrifice. But with our fans behind us as the host nation we will be the favourites," he added.

Essien insists he will join up with Ghana on time for the finals, which begin on January 20, even though Chelsea are keen to delay his departure.

"It's something that the clubs know before they sign African players," Essien said. "It is a massive blow for the clubs but we need to go and help our country."

"Of course I know the tension it causes, but I can't help it. I have to answer to my national team. I committed to my national team."

He said: "I can't do everything by myself. I need the team and they need me. That is why I'm happy to see the team is more like it was in 2001 and 2002."

"My performance today was like the team's performance. If the team plays good then El Hadji plays good. If the team doesn't play good, I don't."

Senegal captain Diouf believes

Capello feels cheated

EUROSPORT, undated

Former coach Fabio Capello has lashed out at Real Madrid's directors claiming they promised that both he and assistant director Franco Baldini would be staying at the club this season.

Capello was sacked just two weeks after steering the club to their first Liga title in four years also said he felt let down by the club and, in particular, president Ramon Calderon and sporting director Predrag Mijatovic.

"Mijatovic lied to me and Franco Baldini, who had a very important offer from another team," Capello told Spanish sports daily Marca. "He said: 'you will stay here, we will all be staying here.'

"I never heard anything from [Calderon]. He has never called me I think I deserved some respect from someone who came to get me from Italy, someone I helped to win the elections and succeed as president.

Capello revealed that he was aware of the club's efforts to secure successor Bernd Schuster but believed that winning the title would keep him his job.

"What hurt me the most was that they appointed me to do a serious, tough and difficult job and we had a very difficult dressing room to deal with," he continued.

"There were many conflicting groups and each one had its leader who blamed the others when things weren't going well."

"But we pulled together, recovered the team spirit and they played with great enthusiasm and belief."

The decision to drop David Beckham from the first team, after he announced he would be joining LA Galaxy, was also the work of the directors Capello said.

"The decision was taken because club management said that he had negotiated with them having already agreed a contract with Los Angeles," he added.

"They said that they couldn't count on a player that wasn't going to remain at the club. When I work I always wear the club shirt and defend the club in every way I can."

Emerson joins AC Milan

AFP, Rome

Real Madrid's Brazilian international midfielder Emerson on Tuesday signed for Italian Serie A giants AC Milan.

The Milan-based club however did not disclose details of the contract.

Emerson said in an interview with Gazzetta dello Sport on Saturday that he hoped that the atmosphere in Milan would be "rather more relaxed" and allow him to be "relaxed and happy" instead of staying at a club where he feels "constantly under pressure and always having to justify myself".

Emerson, 31, previously played six seasons in Italy's Serie A, with Roma (2000-2004) and Juventus (2004-2006).

Diouf steals the show

Football

AFP, London

Senegal striker El Hadji Diouf impressed a host of Premiership managers and scouts as his predatory strike earned Senegal a 1-1 draw against Ghana in Tuesday's friendly international in London.

Birmingham manager Steve Bruce, West Ham boss Alan Curbishley and several representatives from other English clubs were in the crowd at Millwall's New Den to watch unsettled Bolton striker Diouf and Fulham midfielder Papa Bouba Diop.

It was Diouf who stole the show just a day after making it clear he is unhappy at Bolton as the Senegal captain's second-half strike cancelled out Gyan Asamoah's opener.

Diouf's public demand for Sammy Lee to sign at least five players capable of making Bolton into contenders for a Champions League place could well herald the start of an attempt to leave the

Reebok Stadium.

And if Bruce, Curbishley or any other prospective employer was weighing up a bid for Diouf, his influential display here may well have persuaded them to take the plunge.

Bouba Diop's three-year spell at Fulham is also likely to end before the transfer window closes on August 31 after the Senegal midfielder admitted Cottagers manager Lawrie Sanchez had told him he could leave.

The 29-year-old has lost his place to Steven Davis but he is a formidable presence and his typically bone-shaking tackles underlined why Portsmouth's Harry Redknapp is among several managers preparing a four million pounds bid.

While Diouf may not be happy at Bolton, Senegal coach Henri Kasperczak has no doubts about his commitment to the Lions of Teranga and handed him the captain's armband.

One fine individual effort midway through the first half showed the danger Diouf can pose. Taking

possession wide on the right he embarked on a jinking run and shot that nearly caught out Ghana keeper Richard Kingson.

Ghana were playing their first match since March's defeat against Brazil, but there were few signs of rustiness. Hamini Draman was close to breaking the deadlock with a close range effort, only for Tony Sylvain's sprawling save to keep him out.

Just four days after their blunder cost Fulham a point in a Premiership match against Middlesbrough, referee Andy D'Urso and linesman Ian Gosling were reunited at the New Den.

Neither official spotted that David Healy's last minute shot had crossed the line, with Gosling dropped for this coming weekend's matches in the English top-flight as a result. Fortunately his eyesight seemed to have improved here and there was no repeat of that error.

Ghana coach Claude Le Roy was without injured captain Stephen Appiah, another player believed to interest Curbishley, but he was still

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Hamburg win Van der Vaart verdict

AFP, Hamburg

Bundesliga side SV Hamburg were declared the winners on Wednesday in their battle with Valencia for Dutch midfielder Rafael Van der Vaart after the Spanish side admitted defeat.

The Spanish giants had tabled a 14-million-euro offer for the 24-year-old, who has made no secret of his desire to move to Spain and was photographed with a Valencia shirt over the weekend.

Hamburg had taken legal action to stop Valencia talking to Van der Vaart and slapped a fine of 40,000 euros on the Dutchman for his behaviour, but the Spaniards finally conceded defeat on Wednesday.

"We got a fax from Valencia on Tuesday night which says they accept our decision not to release our player and they have withdrawn their offer," Hamburg club director Dietmar Beiersdorfer said.

Even a vastly improved offer of 22 million euros could not divert Hamburg's attention for their want-away star and club captain, under contract until 2010, who was due to play for the Netherlands in a friendly against Switzerland on Wednesday.

"We have disciplined Rafael in ways which I am not prepared to discuss and I am still convinced he is a decent boy, even if other people

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Heinze moving to Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are close to signing Manchester United's Argentine defender Gabriel Heinze for around 12 million euros, Spanish sports daily Marca reported Wednesday.

The two clubs reached an agreement in principle for the transfer of the 29-year-old on Tuesday, the newspaper said.

Six-time French champions Lyon, who are looking to fill the void left by Brazilian centre-back Cris who has been ruled out for six months with a knee injury, have also made a offer for Heinze worth nine million euros, it said.

Heinze is eager to join Liverpool but his wish has been firmly rebuffed by the Premier League champions.

The player took his case for a move to Liverpool to the Premier League on the grounds that he had a letter from Manchester United chief executive David Gill which said he could leave Old Trafford for 6.8 million pounds.

But a three-member Premier League panel has ruled that the letter did not constitute consent for Heinze to leave and the player now feels he has no future left at the English club.

"This is not a war but I have to consider my stay at Manchester United," he said in an interview published in British newspaper Daily Mirror on Wednesday.

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Torres at home?

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Spain striker Fernando Torres said Tuesday scoring for Liverpool is helping him adapt to life with the English Premier League title-chasers.

The 23-year-old, who joined the Reds from Atletico Madrid in July for a Liverpool record 26.5 million pound (52.5 million dollar, 39 million euro) fee, reckons he has plenty more to do before he feels fully at home at Anfield.

However, a few more goals like his excellent strike in Sunday's 1-1 draw there with title-rivals Chelsea will help him settle in, the Spaniard said.

"Everything is different in England and I have to get used to that," Torres

told the club's website.

"The way the fans live the game and sing throughout to create an atmosphere is different. Before the game, everyone sings as well. It is not the same as it is in Spain."

"The English game is more physical, too, but it's nice. It's end to end, it flows more and it doesn't stop so often. For the fans and for the players, that's great."

"Manchester United and Chelsea are the strongest teams, but every game is intense. You have to adapt your game according to your opponents."

"There is a lot of expectation among the fans because of the fee, but all I can do is work and score goals like I did against Chelsea."

"Scoring helps with your adaptation, but I don't feel any pressure, so the goal did not come as a relief."

"I am very pleased for the future it was positive. He showed the quality he has and we will see more goals from him."

Samba down under

Football

AFP, Sydney

start to know more about soccer in Australia since Romario came here last year (in a guest appearance). And the agents, the clubs -- they are bringing more players."

Just two Brazilians were in the A-League when it was launched in 2005, but two years later the number has jumped to 13 from football's greatest exporter of talent -- there are about 5,000 Brazilians playing abroad in 77 countries.

Juninho, who played 50 times for his country from 1995 to 2003, is the first Brazilian national team player to play in Australia on a full-time basis.

Meanwhile champions Melbourne Victory have midfielder Carlos Hernandez, who played for Costa Rica at last year's World Cup, and Newcastle signed Argentine striker Jorge Drovandi to partner Jardel, the scorer of over 330 goals for 12 clubs.