



Italy midfielder Gennaro Gattuso (2nd R) pulls a prank on teammate Massimo Oddo (R) which is greeted with laughs from coach Roberto Donadoni (L) and Daniele de Rossi during a training session at the National Technical Center in Florence on Tuesday.

A legend in the making

Football

AFP, Paris

Brazil and AC Milan's Kaka, perhaps the best attacking midfielder in the world, is one of the favourites for December's 2007 European Footballer of the Year award.

The 25-year-old Kaka looks a top tip having starred in AC Milan's run to the 2006/07 Champions League title.

Few fans of Manchester United will forget Kaka's opening goal in the semifinal, second leg at the San Siro, a low drive from 20 metres, which put the tie level at 3-3, but crucially left the Italians ahead on away goals.

Milan went on to win 3-0, and 5-3 on aggregate, before going on to beat Liverpool 2-1 in the Athens final.

Kaka plays in the style of a classic number 10 such as legends Pele, Diego Maradona, Michel Platini

and Zinedine Zidane, whom so many youngsters dream of emulating.

Kaka, born Ricardo Izecson dos Santos Leite, comes from a comfortably off family in Sao Paulo, not from the slums which have produced so many top Brazilians, and aged just 20 played in his first World Cup in 2002 where Brazil won the title for the fifth time.

At a young age, the diminutive Kaka had high hopes heaped on his shoulders with the Brazilian media saying he would emulate legendary playmakers such as Rivelino and Socrates and it was not a surprise when he joined European giants AC Milan in 2003.

His talent was as obvious as the jokes about his name were numerous and he was a key component of AC Milan's 2003/2004 Italian league winning team which finished 11 points ahead of AS Roma.

Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi is famously said to have commented: "Kaka? We could

never sign anyone with a name like that." Of course AC Milan had the last laugh and he went on to become one of the best players in Italy.

He was part of the Brazilian dream team which, for them, did so disastrously to lose to France in the World Cup quarterfinals in 2006, to all appearances because of over-confidence.

Although last season Kaka did not score many goals in Serie A, he still managed to set up a lot of scores for his teammates. However, his strike rate of 10 goals in 13 matches in the Champions League helped AC Milan avenge their defeat to Liverpool in the 2005 final.

As his career has progressed, he has become more fluent in his movement, has continually improved technically and has generally got better and better in all departments.

In an interview published just last week, AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi said that "there has never been any possibility" that

Milan would sell Kaka, who has been a target of Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon.

Real Madrid offered AC Milan 90 million euros (123 million US dollars) for Kaka, Spanish sports daily Marca reported in the summer.

Kaka, the highest earning footballer in Italy, "has never wanted to leave and I believe that he will never do so... Kaka is the symbol of Milan," Berlusconi added.

And Kaka is the highest earning footballer in Italy with an annual salary of six million euros, according to a study published in the Gazzetta dello Sport.

Milan, who have the biggest wages bill at 120 million euros a year, certainly have the financial muscle to handily pay for Kaka's huge influence on the team.

Kaka is contracted to them till 2011 when he will not even have reached 30 and the European footballer of the year award seems another inevitable honour for this remarkable footballer.

Broadcasters, club battle in Spain

AFP, Madrid

Several Spanish clubs have complained over non-payment of fees for television broadcasts of matches, the result of a cutthroat battle between two media groups for control of the market, a Spanish business daily reported Tuesday.

Six clubs in the first division and most of those in the second division have not been paid this month by AVS, a subsidiary of media giant Sogetel, which holds the broadcast rights, La Gaceta de los Negocios quoted sources close to the Spain's professional football league (LFP) as saying.

AVS said the non-payments were due to financial difficulties, the papers said.

AVS holds the broadcast rights to matches for 12 first division clubs, including those of league leaders Real Madrid Barcelona.

But for the past few months, Sogetel, which operates Canal Plus in Spain, and the Mediapro group have been locked in a battle to control television broadcast rights, which has at times led to the non-transmission of certain matches.

In July 2006, the two groups agreed that AVS could have broadcast rights. But Mediapro then negotiated with the clubs to hold those rights from 2009, excluding Sogetel from the profitable market.

Since then each side has accused the other of failing to respect their commitments.

The LFP is meanwhile attempting to resolve the conflict, La Gaceta said, but gave no further details.

The first division clubs that have complained are Almeria, Osasuna, Recreativo Huelva, Majorca, Espanyol Barcelona and Valladolid.

Celta Vigo sack Stoitchkov

AFP, Madrid

Former Barcelona and Bulgarian international Hristo Stoitchkov has been sacked as coach of struggling Celta Vigo, Spanish media reported Monday.

Stoitchkov, 41, was appointed last April when the Galician club was still in the Spanish first division, but was unable to avoid relegation.

He will be replaced by former Real Madrid coach Juan Ramon Lopez Caro, according to press reports.

Stoitchkov, winner of the European Player of the Year in 1994, replaced Fernando Vazquez in April. The club finished last season in 18th place.

As a player with Barcelona, Stoitchkov won a Champions League trophy in 1992 and four Spanish league titles, and as Bulgarian captain made it to the semifinals of the 1994 World Cup.

Celta Vigo are currently sitting 11th in the second division.

Arsenal launch Chinese website

AFP, Beijing

English Premiership leaders Arsenal launched a Chinese-language website here on Tuesday in a bid to widen the club's global fan base and increase its support in the world's most populous country.

Manager Arsene Wenger said he hoped the new site, <http://arsenal.com>, would turn "all" of China's 1.3 billion people into avid fans of the Gunners, who are unbeaten after eight league games.

"Of course you now have the largest population in the world and we would like to make them all Arsenal fans," Wenger said in a video message to the website launch ceremony here.

Arsenal are following in the footsteps of Chelsea, who opened a similar site earlier this year, and reigning champions Manchester United, who are also keen to boost their profile in China.

United toured Asia in July and played two matches in China while Chelsea are set to tour China next year.

Arsenal managing director Keith Edelman signed the joint venture agreement here under which Tom.com hosts the website, will match the content of the club's English site. China's leading sports newspaper Titan Sports Weekly will oversee the Chinese content.

Edelman said Arsenal expected to double its Chinese fan base within the next two years.

"We know we have about 50 million fans in the world that support Arsenal and we believe that about four million of them would sit in China," he said.

"But we hope that with these new venues with Tom.com and

Bayern, Bolton in the same group

AFP, Paris



French striker Nicolas Anelka said an upset of UEFA Cup favourite Bayern Munich by Bolton would put the Premiership club on the map as a European force, following Tuesday's group stage draw.

Bayern Munich, who have had a continual presence in the Champions League for a decade and a half, are in the second-tier UEFA Cup this time and would look a tough draw but Anelka saw the positive side of playing the German giants.

Anelka told the Bolton club website they had nothing to lose when they go to Munich next month: "I would love to go there

and upset the world of football by winning. It would put Bolton on the map in terms of being a European force.

"Bayern Munich are the best team in the competition and will give us a great test in Munich. I have played at the old Olympic Stadium many times and the atmosphere is amazing.

"The new Allianz Arena, where

they play now, is one of the best stadiums in the world. I haven't played there before but I'm looking forward to it. Bayern have some great players that will be a threat to us.

"My international teammate Franck Ribery joined them from Marseille this season and he is a great talent, who has the ability to change a game."

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GROUP PHASE

GROUP A AZ Alkmaar, Zenit St Petersburg, Everton, Nurnberg, Larissa	GROUP E Bayer Leverkusen, Sparta Prague, Spartak Moscow, Toulouse, FC Zurich
GROUP B Panathinaikos, Lokomotiv Moscow, Atletico Madrid, Copenhagen, Aberdeen	GROUP F Bayern Munich, Bolton Wanderers, FC Braga, Red Star Belgrade, Aris Thessaloniki
GROUP C Villarreal, AEK Athens, Fiorentina, Mladost, Boleoslav, Elfsborg	GROUP G Anderlecht, Tottenham Hotspur, Getafe, Hapoel Tel Aviv, AaB Aalborg
GROUP D Basel, Hamburg, Rennes, Dinamo Zagreb, Brann	GROUP H Bordeaux, Austria Vienna, Galatasaray, Panionios, Helsingborgs

McClaren calls for repeat

Football

AFP, London

England manager Steve McClaren has called for his players to dish up a repeat dose of last month's back to back wins in next week's Euro 2008 qualifiers against Russia and Estonia.

After a troubled start to his time in charge of England McClaren is finally experiencing a sense of unity as England's Euro 2008 qualifying campaign reaches its climax.

Certainly, there were no complaints from the home fans last month as McClaren's men recorded back-to-back three-goal wins over Israel and major Group E rivals Russia.

Those victories mean England now occupy pole position in their

bid to accompany likely table-toppers Croatia into next summer's finals.

But McClaren is eager to ensure the momentum is not lost on Saturday when Estonia head to Wembley for a contest which should provide the ideal confidence boost ahead of the trip to Moscow four days later for a rematch with Gennadiy Shigalov's Russia that will probably determine England's fate.

"Before the Israel game I called for everyone to push together on behalf of the team," said McClaren.

"The reaction was amazing and the atmosphere transmitted itself over to the players, so we ended up with a performance everyone wanted."

"Those last two wins have put us in an excellent position. But the job is still to be completed, which is

why the fans must realise they have such an important role to play this weekend."

McClaren has already hinted at changes for Estonia's visit as he looks to ensure his strongest possible side is available for the Moscow adventure.

Skipper John Terry, central defensive partner Rio Ferdinand and Chelsea duo Joe and Ashley Cole are most at risk given they are a caution away from suspension.

Michael Owen and Frank Lampard both played for their clubs at the weekend and will need to have their fitness assessed before McClaren finalises his line-up.

Yet the former Middlesbrough boss is acutely aware he cannot risk an unexpected slip-up against an Estonia side whose only point - with the exception of a win over

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Owen blames hard pitches

THE GUARDIAN

As England prepare for their crucial Euro 2008 qualifying match on a plastic pitch in Russia a week tomorrow, Michael Owen admitted that playing on hard surfaces has contributed to his recent injury problems.

The England striker returned to action for Newcastle United at the weekend, scoring in the 3-2 win over Everton, having undergone the second of two groin operations just eight days earlier. And with the national team needing maximum points from their double-header - they face Estonia at Wembley on Saturday before heading to Russia - Owen conceded: "My injury was wear-and-tear - you go out on hard pitches every day and it takes its toll. But it's much stronger than when I went in for surgery. Even when it feels a bit tight you just plough through it."

Owen is convinced he will be able to handle two international matches in five days, despite the concerns of his club manager, Sam Allardyce, who believes it may prove too much for his 17 million pound striker.

"I will listen to my surgeon [Ulrike Muschawek] and not anyone else because she knows what she is talking about," insisted Owen. "It's feeling good and I'm available for both teams I represent. I don't see why I can't play against Estonia. The surgeon tells me you can't go wrong in terms of the operation."

Muschawek - a pioneering surgeon who specialises in facilitating exceptionally swift recoveries from a procedure which can sideline players for six weeks - has performed hernia repairs on a host of leading footballers at her clinic in Munich, but none is known to have returned to action as quickly as Owen. "Hopefully eight days is a record," said the Newcastle striker. "I've talked to Alan Shearer and he got back in 12 days from his operation [a hernia correction performed by Muschawek]."

"It's open surgery but you can get back quickly as long as you can manage the pain," added Owen, who played against Everton on

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Man Utd go Bollywood

Football

AFP, Mumbai

Bollywood movie "Goal" has tied up with Manchester United Football Club in the hope of scoring a major hit when it is released at the end of the month.

Indian hunk John Abraham plays the role of a footballer inspired by the English Premier League champions.

"It's great to be associated with the Manchester United Club for our film," Abraham told Tuesday's The Times of India. "I have been a die-hard soccer fan

since childhood and I have been idolising Manchester United since then."

The movie's director Vivek Agnihotri said it was the first time that the club would be associated with an Indian movie.

"We have shot in (the) club premises which is also another first for any Indian movie," he said.

The Times of India said England's Wayne Rooney and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo will be among the United heroes featured in promotional clips for the movie.

Bollywood bombshell Bipasha Basu, Abraham's girlfriend, also stars in "Goal."

The story revolves around a club facing closure unless they start winning games.

The manager takes his players to Manchester United, not to learn to sing and dance in traditional Bollywood style, but to seek inspiration.

With India's economy booming and new audiences being drawn to the cinema, Bollywood films are branching out into new fields.

"Chak De India" (Go India), a film based about hockey, proved a roaring success this year with superstar Shah Rukh Khan in the role of a disgraced player who turns the Indian women's hockey team into world cup winners.

Diouf quits Senegal

Football

INTERNET, undated

Senegal forward El Hadji Diouf has quit the national team, accusing the federation of being unprofessional.

Diouf burst onto the scene with the Tareng Lions at the 2002 World Cup, where they beat then-holders France in the opening game.

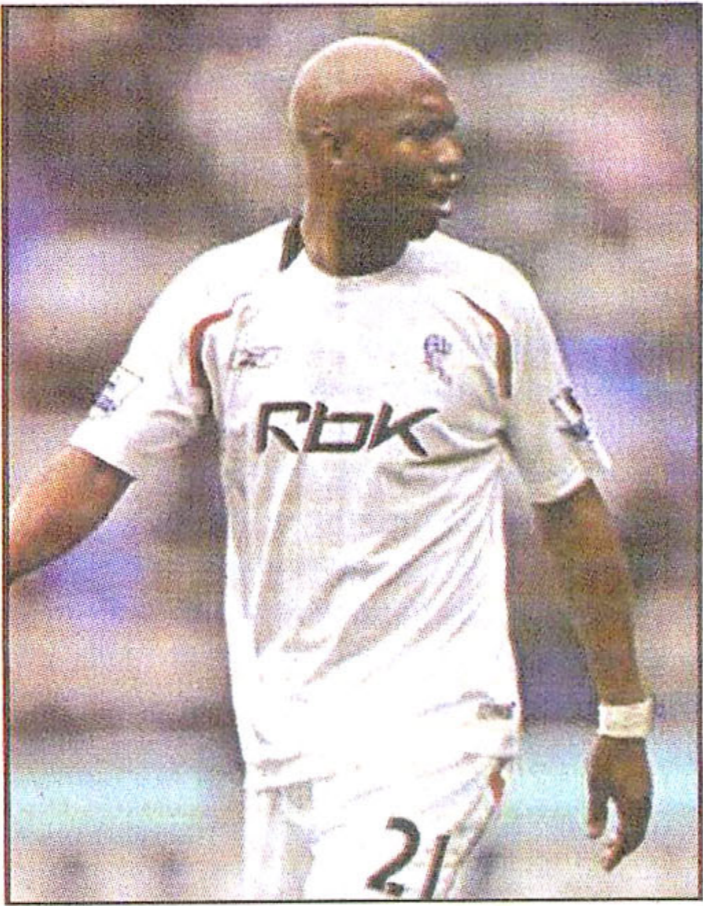
His performances for Senegal led to a big-money move to Liverpool, where he failed to fulfill his potential, although his subsequent transfer to Bolton made him one of the most exciting attacking in the Premier League.

"I have stopped my international career," Diouf told radio station RFM. "There are so many problems with the national team."

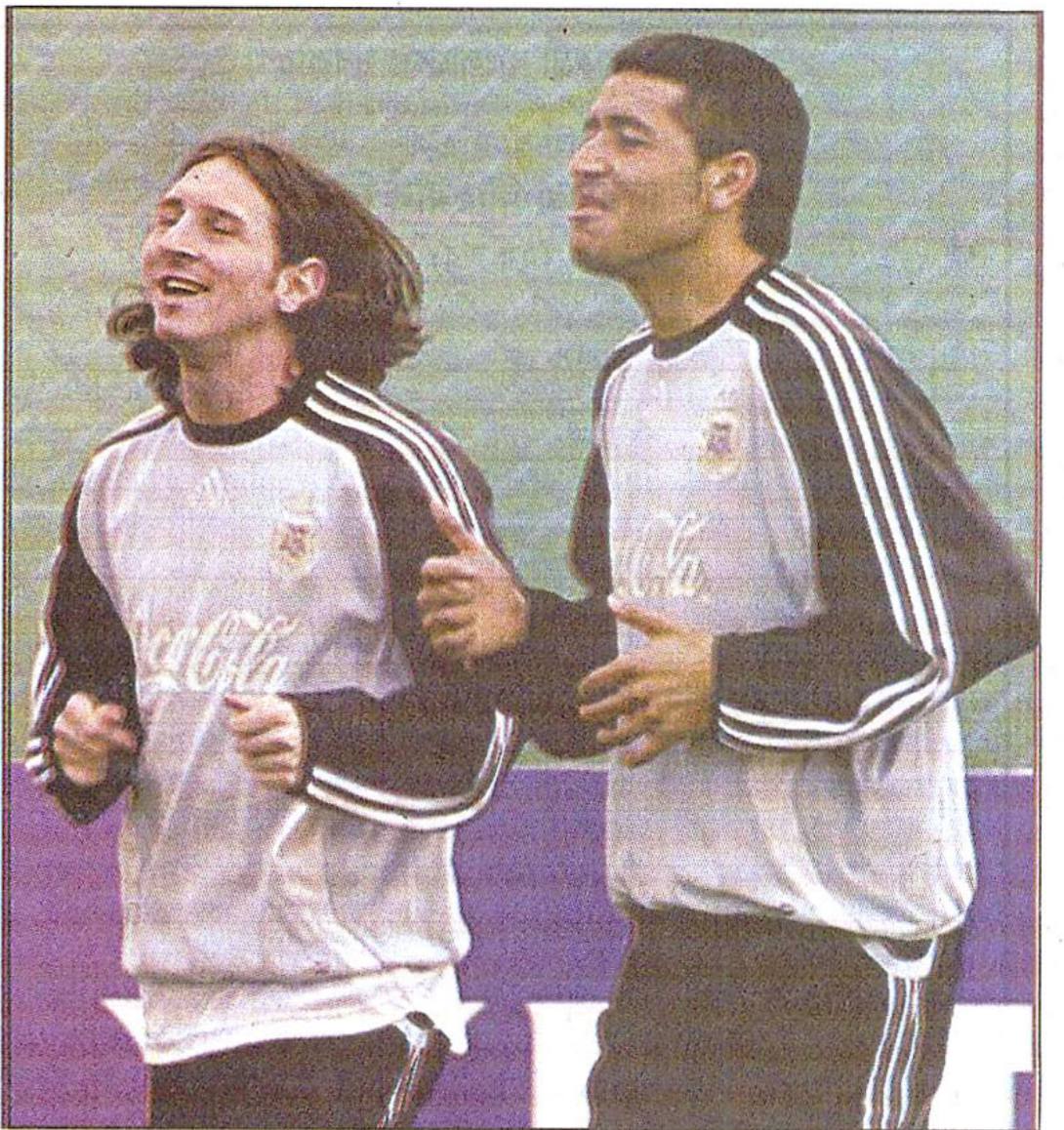
"The team has a scheduled friendly match in a week and we don't even know who we are playing against," he cited as an example.

"This is unacceptable." Diouf, 26, is Senegal's most capped player, with 41 appearances for the West African nation, but has had enough of what he sees as amateurish organisation of professional players.

"If we have to come and play for our country, we have to pay for our own air ticket and reimbursement of the cost is another big problem," he added.



EL HADJI DIOUF



Argentina midfield stars Lionel Messi (L) and Juan Roman Riquelme share a light moment while they jog during a training session in Buenos Aires on Monday.

FIFA happy with S Africa

Football

AFP, Cape Town

World football's governing body FIFA said Tuesday that South Africa's programme of stadium building remained on schedule, despite a recent strike by construction workers in Cape Town.

"This is nothing. I have known much worse," said Leiblang -- referring to a general strike in France as it prepared to host the same tournament in 1998.

"So far, we have a calendar, we have a time schedule, and it is on track."

Leiblang was part of a group of FIFA subject experts in South Africa to examine progress with information technology, telecommunications, stadium building, media and marketing, hospitality and security.

outstanding issues were merely a matter of detail.

No serious shortcomings had been identified, and there was little concern over recent labour disputes between workers and stadium construction companies in Cape Town and Durban.

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The team visited Johannesburg on Monday, Cape Town on Tuesday, and will proceed to Durban and Port Elizabeth on Wednesday.

The visit was partly aimed at ensuring a balance between FIFA's World Cup needs and the legacy to remain after the world's most popular sporting event is staged on African soil for the first time ever.

"From time to time we have to say: 'take care, don't go in this direction, there is no need. Don't do more than we need,'" said Leiblang.

Construction of the 66,000-seater Green Point Stadium, due to host one of the 2010 semifinals, was halted for a week last month in a dispute over travel benefits.

And workers at Durban's Moses Mabhida Stadium have threatened to down tools for higher wages.