

FORMULA 1 Alonso on way out

AFP, Madrid

Mercedes has given the green light to McLaren to drop Spain's two-time Formula One world champion Fernando Alonso from the team for next season, a Spanish sporting daily said Thursday.

Mercedes bosses met in Germany and reached the conclusion it is in the best interests of the company and the (McLaren-Mercedes) team to let go of the Spaniard at the end of the year," the Marca daily said.

The decision was motivated by the poor personal relations between Alonso and both his British teammate Lewis Hamilton and McLaren boss Ron Dennis, Marca said, quoting sources close to McLaren-Mercedes.

It was "backed yesterday (Wednesday) by all the partners and the team," including Dennis.

"This situation means that all roads for Alonso lead to Renault," the team with which the Spaniard won world titles in 2005 and 2006, the newspaper said.

Renault "promised him a place with the possibility of winning the title and is currently taking steps to find the funds necessary to sign him on a contract equivalent" to the one he has with McLaren, Marca said.

It noted that Alonso could not join Ferrari, which has Brazilian driver Felipe Massa under contract through 2010 and Finland's Kimi Raikkonen to 2009.

As world champion he expected to be treated as number one and became increasingly irritated at what he perceived to be McLaren's favouritism towards Hamilton.

Rookie Hamilton tops the Formula One drivers' standings, four points ahead of Alonso with the last race of the season scheduled for Sunday in Brazil. Raikkonen, in third place, also has a chance to take his first ever world title.

ANC seeds named

AFP, Accra

Hosts Ghana and title holders Egypt are among the top seeds for the 2008 African Nations Cup draw here Friday.

Another couple of former champions, Nigeria and Tunisia, complete the first tier for the two-hour ceremony at the International Conference Centre in this coastal city.

Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Morocco and Senegal are seeded second, Guinea, Mali, South Africa and Zambia third and Angola, Benin, Namibia and Sudan fourth for the biennial tournament.

The possibility exists of Nigeria, Ivory Coast, South Africa and Angola being brought together during the two-hour event scheduled to start at 1500GMT, or Ghana, Cameroon, Mali and Sudan.

Egypt (five titles), Cameroon and Ghana (four each), Nigeria (two) and Ivory Coast, Morocco, Sudan, South Africa and Tunisia are the nine former champions in contention.

And Zambia (twice), Guinea, Mali and Senegal have finished runners-up in a competition that has grown from a three-team tournament staged in Khartoum in 1957 to a 16-nation spectacle broadcast worldwide.

Namibia and Benin timed their runs perfectly to snatch places in the last round of qualifying while potential surprise packets Sudan topped Group 4 ahead of 2004 champions Tunisia, one of three runners-up to make it.

Ghana are used to hosting the cream of African football, most recently in 2000 as co-hosts with Nigeria, and fixtures will be staged in Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi and Tamale.

Quarterfinals, semifinals, third-place playoff and the final go to 30 minutes of extra time if necessary followed by a penalty shootout should the teams remain deadlocked.

Accra will host the opening match on January 20 and the final on February 10 with particularly brave punters predicting a showdown between hosts Ghana and Didier Drogba-inspired Ivory Coast for the title.

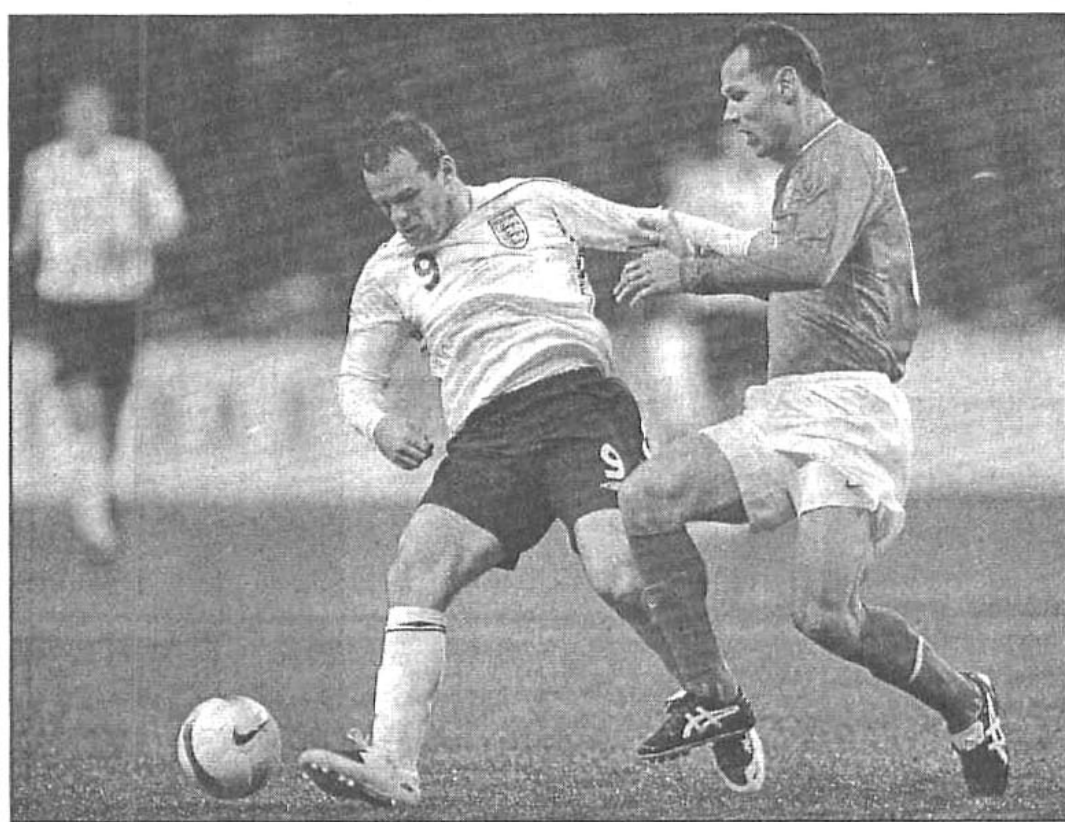
Rejoinder

In your widely circulated newspaper published on October 10, 2007, regarding the collapse of the press box at the Bangabandhu National Stadium, you have noted Shaheedullah and Associates Ltd was contractor of the work. But this is not the fact.

We were not involved in any way for preparation of design and drawing, including construction work of the said press box. Our consultancy service is only related with preparation of architectural and engineering design and drawing and supervision of construction work. We have never been involved in any construction work.

OUR REPLY

We regret the error, a case of mistaken identity. In fact, Shaheedullah and New Associates was involved in design and construction of the press box at BNS. SM Shaheedullah, managing director of Shaheedullah and New Associates, was also the proprietor of Shaheedullah and Associates in the past but his associates had decided to work separately under the firm's old name.



England star Wayne Rooney (L) holds off a challenge from Russia's Sergei Ignashevich during their Euro 2008 qualifying match in Moscow on Wednesday. Russia won 2-1.

Gerrard hoping for a favour

THE GUARDIAN



quality for a major tournament for the first time since the World Cup in 1994.

The acting England captain spoke about a devastating and "mad" spell in the second half when he and his teammates contributed heavily to their own downfall. Gerrard said the goalkeeper, Paul Robinson, "will feel disappointed with the second goal" and accepted his culpability after squandering a splendid chance to make it 2-0.

"I can't quite believe that qualifying is now out of our hands but, as players, we have to take the respon-

sibility. We were in control, 1-0 up, and the game-plan was working perfectly. I had a great chance to make it 2-0 and then we had a mad five or 10 minutes when the game changed in their favour.

"We've worked so hard over the last five or six months to put ourselves in the driving seat and make ourselves favourites to go through our qualifying group. When we were 1-0 ahead, we started to believe we were nearly there and had one foot in the tournament. But football's a cruel game and changes, decisions and mistakes change football matches."

Gerrard dwelt on the penalty that was awarded against Wayne Rooney, claiming that the point of contact with Russia's Konstantin Zyryanov had been outside the penalty area. "We were hard done by," he said.

"Wayne is adamant that it was outside the box but the referee seemed to overrule the linesman and give a penalty that wasn't.

That turned the whole game in their favour. It gave them a lot of confidence. They were on the front foot after that and they put us under a lot of pressure. But we should really have been stronger and seen the game out."

Of his own chance Gerrard added: "I didn't expect to have so much time and I seemed to be waiting for an eternity for the ball to come down so I could hit it. But I'm disappointed because I should have done better."

The defeat means England are relying on Russia not winning their next two games before England finish against the current leaders, Croatia. "It's unthinkable that we could have a European Championships without England being there but it's very important that we don't give up," Gerrard added.

"We are waiting and hoping for other people to do us a favour but we have to stick together, focus, and continue believing right until the end."

Dravid 'axed' with reason



INTERNET, undated

As the Indians went through their pre-match warm-ups, the news had spread that Rahul Dravid wasn't to be in the playing eleven on Wednesday. But even if one didn't trust the grapevine, the signs were there. He went through the training session but didn't take that usual long look at the pitch and when he left the field, he walked to the pavilion looking at the Aussie fielding session that had several 30-plus players.

Among them was 32-year-old Brad Hodge, with an average of 9.83 in the series, a shade less than Dravid's 10.20, but still untouched. Patience was the prerogative of winning teams it seems. The man known as 'Mr Consistent' for years wasn't shown the leniency by a losing unit after his recent inconsistent show. The man who was used to carrying out the operations till some time back was carrying drinks on Wednesday.

Not that he would have minded, considering the incredible win. But ask the BCCI secretary Niranjan Shah to choose between two words -- dropped or rested -- and he opts for the former with a typical twist. "A person in the 14 but not in the 11

is said to be rested," he says.

Former India coach Aunshuman Gaekwad agrees with this decision to rest Dravid. "He hasn't looked confident of late. His body language hasn't been great. So it isn't wrong to see him sit out of this game," he says.

The debate about the final eleven was kicked up on the eve of the game when India seemed to be having a team meeting on field. Chairman of national selectors Dilip Vengsarkar, skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni, deputy Yuvraj Singh and senior pro Sachin Tendulkar were seen one-by-one propping up fingers from closed fists: the usual gesture of someone making a headcount.

As it is learnt now, the decision on Dravid was taken at that time and the reason: his non-utility to the team when he isn't scoring runs. The feeling among the decision-makers is while Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly can bowl, Dravid, while fielding, is merely a safe slip fielder at best.

Interestingly, Dravid had three slumps of ODI forms in his career. He was dropped in 1997-98 but very recently he had survived the axe even when the runs had dried out. In the period overlapping the World Cup in 2003 and the New Zealand ODI series before that, Dravid went without scoring a 50

for 12 innings.

In fact, even before this World Cup, things weren't smooth for Dravid. In the tri-series in Malaysia and the subsequent games against West Indies and Sri Lanka, Dravid featured in 10 games without reaching the half-century mark.

So how is it that Dravid missed the cut since this time around the non-50 games count has just reached 10? The reason: Like in 2007, Dravid isn't the skipper and as in 2003, he isn't a wicketkeeper now. When the runs dry, Dravid doesn't have a plank to hold on to.

Dravid for now is banking on the bat to row out of troubled waters. During the mid-innings break, he had a long session with bowling coach Venkatesh Prasad on field. This was followed by a long discussion. And when the Indian innings began, it was clear Dravid's absence in the XI was temporary, considering his replacement Dinesh Kaarthick was out for a duck.

Gaekwad gives his take on this. "One thing is clear. The people who have replaced Dravid are nowhere close to him. He is a guy who will consolidate when there is a fall of an early wicket. He should be your No 3 and he has lots of cricket left in him," he says.

That means 'yes' to be rested for a game, but 'no' to miss out from the ODI squad for Pakistan series.

they won the toss and decided to bat. Confusion between Smith and Gibbs gave Pakistan the breakthrough when the South African captain failed to beat a throw from square-leg after his fellow opener refused him a second run.

Kallis, who made 421 runs during South Africa's 1-0 win in the two-Test series over Pakistan, made only eight before giving a return catch to leg-spinner Afridi.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard of the first one-day international between Pakistan and South Africa at the Gaddafi Stadium on Thursday:

SOUTH AFRICA
Gibbs run out 102
Smith run out 34
Kallis c and b Afridi 8
De Villiers not out 103
Kemp lbw b Tanveer 1
Boucher c Younis b Iftekhar 14
Pollock not out 5
Extras: (lb-16, nb-3, w-8) 27
Total: (For five wickets in 50 overs) 294
Did not bat: Morkel, Botha, Ntini and Langeveldt.
Fall of wickets: 1-85, 2-97, 3-234, 4-238, 5-288

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Tanveer	9	1	52	1
Iftekhar	10	1	57	1
Gul	8	0	54	0
Afridi	10	0	48	1
Hafeez	10	0	44	0
Malik	3	0	23	0

PAKISTAN
Hafeez c Botha b Ntini 6
Nazir c Kemp b Ntini 16
Younis c Boucher b Ntini 12
Yousuf c Smith b Kallis 53
Malik c Gibbs b Ntini 18
Misbahul c Boucher b Langeveldt 20
Akmal b Kallis 35
Afridi c De Villiers b Morkel 47
Tanveer b Langeveldt 26
Iftekhar run out 9
Gul not out 1

Extras: (b-1, lb-1, w-4) 6
Total: (All out in 46.3 overs) 249
Fall of wickets: 1-18, 2-30, 3-37, 4-55, 5-92, 6-152, 7-172, 8-215

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Pollock	10	2	30	0
Ntini	9	0	69	4
Langeveldt	9	0	53	2
Morkel	6	0	18	1
Botha	7.3	0	30	0
Kallis	5	0	47	2

Result: South Africa won by 45 runs.
Man-of-the-match: Ab De Villiers.
Umpires: Billy Bowden and Nadeem Ghouri.

Mourinho to replace McClaren?

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho has been made the favourite by English bookmakers to replace Steve McClaren as England coach.

McClaren faces the axe if England fail to qualify for Euro 2008 and former Chelsea manager Mourinho would be a popular choice to take over.

The Portuguese, currently unemployed after leaving Stamford Bridge last month, had hinted he would like to manage a club in Germany or Italy next, but the chance to lead the English national team may appeal to him.

Most bookmakers regard Mourinho as the prime candidate for the job if McClaren is dismissed. Aston Villa's Martin O'Neill, Portugal coach Luis Felipe Scolari, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger and even Guus Hiddink, whose Russia side pushed McClaren towards the exit door on Wednesday, have all also been heavily backed.

Press hails Czechs

AFP, Prague

Czech newspapers on Thursday basked in the national football team's emphatic qualification for the Euro 2008 finals following the 3-0 away pounding of Germany.

"The Czechs created a bombshell result in Munich," commented the daily Sport, which devoted its first four pages to Wednesday's humiliation of Germany, previously undefeated in qualifying.

"Bruckner's boys put in an excellent performance which will be remembered for a long time," it added, referring to veteran manager Karel Bruckner.

The Czech team blew away the already-qualified Germans in Munich despite the absence of a number of key players including the injured Tomas Rosicky, it underlined.

The result has revived optimism about the national team, tarnished by tabloid reports of hotel orgies off the pitch and unconvincing performances on it earlier this year, papers said.

Bruckner, whose future was even the subject of speculation in the German press, can now boast three successful qualification campaigns in a row, the daily Dnes pointed out, after leading the Czechs into the Euro 2004 and 2006 World Cup finals.

The German press, which heaped praise on its team after they secured their Euro 2008 ticket with a goalless draw against Ireland on Saturday, put the defeat down to a terrible off-night.

"Stumbling Setback" said the back page headline in the Bild tabloid.

"Our national team had just won all over -- and then this," it added, recalling how German fans had greeted the result with loud whistles.

'I want to quit Chelsea'

AFP, London

Didier Drogba has admitted he is determined to quit Chelsea because Jose Mourinho's departure has shattered morale at Stamford Bridge.

Drogba was devastated when Mourinho left the Premier League club last month following the breakdown of the Portuguese manager's relationship with Blues owner Roman Abramovich.

"I want to leave Chelsea," he is quoted as saying in an issue of France Football magazine that will be published on Friday morning. "Something is broken with Chelsea."

"The damage has been big in the dressing room because we know now what happened and who caused Mourinho's departure."

"Nothing can stop me from leaving now."

Drogba, who was in tears when Mourinho said farewell to the team, has been the club's most dangerous striker since arriving from Marseille for 24 million pounds in July 2004.

Last season, he was the first Chelsea player to score 30 goals in a campaign since Kerry Dixon in the 1980s and almost single-handedly dragged the club to the FA and League Cup double with final winners against Manchester United and Arsenal.

Drogba believes he must think of his own career now and he claimed a move to a club that makes him dream would be ideal. He named Barcelona, Real Madrid, AC Milan and Inter Milan as his preferred destinations and he would even consider a return to Marseille.

"I know that Ronaldinho and Kaka are linked to come next season but even that won't change my mind."

Drogba could not leave until the transfer window re-opens in January at the earliest, but Chelsea will be desperate to keep their talismanic striker and it would be no surprise if Grant and Abramovich moved quickly to try to placate him.

HENRY LIFTS FRANCE; GREECE, ROMANIA, CZECH REP THROUGH

Lucarelli double sinks S Africa

INTERNET, undated



Cristiano Lucarelli scored two late goals as an experimental Italy team beat South Africa 2-0 in a friendly Wednesday.

Italy fielded only three players that saw action during the run to their fourth World Cup title last year: Cristian Zaccardo, Daniele De Rossi and Alberto Gilardino, who came on as a substitute. The rest of the squad was comprised of younger players and the 32-year-old Lucarelli.

In the 82nd minute, South Africa's defence left Lucarelli wide open at the edge of the box and the Shakhtar Donetsk striker headed in a cross from Andrea Dossena, who was making his national team debut.

France Semoli provided the cross as Lucarelli headed in his second goal in the 90th.

Earlier, Zaccardo hit the crossbar and Gilardino connected with the post.

Italy have two matches remaining in European Championship qualifying, at Scotland on November 17 and against the Faeroe Islands four days later.

Scotland were beaten 2-0 by Georgia in qualifying Wednesday, boosting Italy's chances of winning Group B.

Thierry Henry netted twice in two minutes to give France a 2-0 win over Lithuania in their Euro 2008 qualifier on Wednesday and also broke Michel Platini's goal scoring record for Les Bleus.

France now need a draw away to Ukraine in their last qualifier on November 21 to reach next year's European championship finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Barcelona striker Henry scored his 42nd and 43rd goals in his 96th appearance in the 79th and 80th minutes to send France top of Group B with 25 points from 11 matches after Scotland slumped to

a 2-0 defeat in Georgia earlier on Wednesday.

Scotland are second, one point behind France, with world champions Italy who have a game in hand against the Scots at Hampden Park next month, third on 23 points.

Holland's 2-0 win over Slovenia in Group G came at a price for Arsenal with Robin van Persie limping off with a twisted knee after an hour. Holland need two points from two games to qualify from Group G but Romania are through after a 2-0 win in Luxembourg.

Greece, winners of Euro 2004, qualified from Group C thanks to Ioannis Amanatidis's late goal in Turkey. Norway won 2-0 in Bosnia and host the Turks on November 17 to decide the second qualifier.

The Czech Republic won 3-0 in Munich in Group D to join already qualified Germany.

Cristiano Ronaldo volleyed the decisive goal for Portugal as they saw off Kazakhstan 2-1 in Group A.

Fans want Austria out

AFP, Vienna



A group of Austrian football fans have started a petition urging the Austrian national team to pull out of the Euro-2008 soccer championships, being co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland, because of the team's dismal performance.

The campaign, entitled "Austrian-free Euro 2008 -- Austria shows backbone", has already collected 10,000 signatures barely a month after its launch, its initiators told AFP on Thursday.

"The 10,000-barrier has just been reached. It's astonishing in such a short period of time," said Michael Kriess, spokesman for group "For the Love of Football" which started the petition.

According to the group's website, the petition was aimed at

people who "care about attractive football, appreciate a blind pass, enjoy amazing dribbling skills and jump for joy when a free kick is expertly bent into the far corner of the goal."

It was aimed at fans who "love this great sport for the sheer beauty of it."

Yet, true football connoisseurs "fall into a dismal state of depression when watching a match featuring the Austrian national football team," the petition complained.

When the Austrian team was on the field, "displays of true skill... occur about as frequently as meteorite impacts."

"The performance of the Austrian team is an insult to our sense of aesthetics," the petition said. "Their participating in the Euro 2008 is a contradiction in itself."

The petitioners therefore urged the Austrian Football Association "to voluntarily resign from participating in the Euro 2008. Austria was

once a country with a keen sense for aesthetics. We want to show the world that we still embrace beauty. We want (Austria) to show some dignity."

Kriess, the son of former national team player Werner Kriess, argued that there was "no place" for the Austrian team, which currently ranks 85th in the world, "in one of the most demanding competitions in the world."

By insisting on participating, the host country would deprive a more deserving team of a place.

Austria beat Ivory Coast 3-2 in a friendly in Innsbruck on Wednesday to record the team's first win in the past 11 months.

Asked about the petition at the beginning of October, UEFA president Michel Platini dismissed it as "the stupidest venture in the world."

The "Austria shows backbone" campaign has triggered a counter-petition in support of the national team.

Kartik takes stage



AFP, Mumbai

Left-arm slow bowlers reaped rich harvest in the seven-match series between India and Australia, highlighted by Murali's Kartik's record-breaking performance in the final game here.

The 31-year-old Indian bowler scripted the team's two-wicket consolation win in the day-night game here Wednesday with a haul of 6-27.

The figures were the best by an Indian bowler against Australia in one-dayers, bettering paceman Ajit Agarkar's 6-42 at Melbourne in 2004.

Kartik's haul just missed the record for the best ever one-day return by an Indian spinner, currently held by Anil Kumble. The leg spinner took 6-12 against West Indies at Kolkata in 1993.

But it was the best performance by any left-arm spinner, surpassing Sri Lankan Sanath Jayasuriya's 6-29 against England.

Significantly, the bead neck-

lace-sporting Kartik also span India to Test victory against Australia inside three days at this venue in 2004-05.

Recalled to the squad midway through the series after 20 months in wilderness at the insistence of Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Kartik repaid his skipper's faith with some inspired bowling.

Kartik kept batsmen on such a tight leash that while the other Indian bowlers gave away 26 wides Wednesday, he had none.

A beaming Dhoni had nothing but praise for his dark horse.

"Kartik bowled beautifully. He was spinning the ball across the face of the bat, varying his flight and line, mixing his length. It was intelligent bowling," he said after the win which helped India finish on 4-2.

In a throwback to a Test scenario, Kartik had a slip, gully and a silly-point to throttle the batsmen. He also sent down a few terrific arm balls.

Australia's left-arm chinaman bowler Brad Hogg also enjoyed success in the series although he

came a cropper in the final game, conceding 40 runs off his eight overs without a wicket.

Hogg proved invaluable in the middle overs with the Indian batsmen, otherwise good players of spin, struggling to counter the bowler.

Captain Ricky Ponting said Hogg had been one of the revelations of the series, which Australia won 4-2.

"Hogg was unbelievable at the World Cup, he is only getting better with each game. With his high left-arm action, he has made it very difficult for batsmen to get into any kind of run-scoring rhythm."

"He bowls a very good wrong 'un, there's no doubt about that. Those sort of bowlers -- leg spinners who bowl with a high arm action from over the top -- are always the hardest to read."

"Even in the World Cup he undid a lot of batsmen with his wrong 'un. I think he's tending to bowl the wrong 'un a lot more and a lot better in recent times. It just shows he's still learning and still improving though he's 36."