

## Kaka wins Ballon d'Or

Football

AFP, Paris

AC Milan's Brazilian midfielder Kaka was named on Sunday as France Football's Player of the Year winning the prestigious Ballon d'Or award.

Born under the name Ricardo Izecson dos Santos Leite, he succeeds Italy's World Cup winning captain and defender Fabio Cannavaro and comes two years after the last Brazilian winner of the trophy, Barcelona's Ronaldinho.

The 25-year-old Kaka notably played a starring role in AC Milan's triumphant Champions League campaign scoring 10 goals and setting up the winner for Filippo Inzaghi in the final against Liverpool.

He received 444 points in the France Football vote, easily ahead of Manchester United's Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo who had 277 with Barcelona's Argentinian midfielder Lionel Messi placing third with 255 points.

"This is very special for me - it culminates an astonishing year for me," Kaka said.

"It's the top prize around and the only way to win something like this is to play for a team like AC Milan. It's great to be part of a team that wins."

Kaka's brother Digao was in Paris for the award ceremony and paid tribute to his brother.

"It's very emotional for me to be here, to see my brother receive this trophy, and to know that he is the best makes me proud," he said.

Kaka's wife Caroline and mother Cristina were also amongst

the guests.

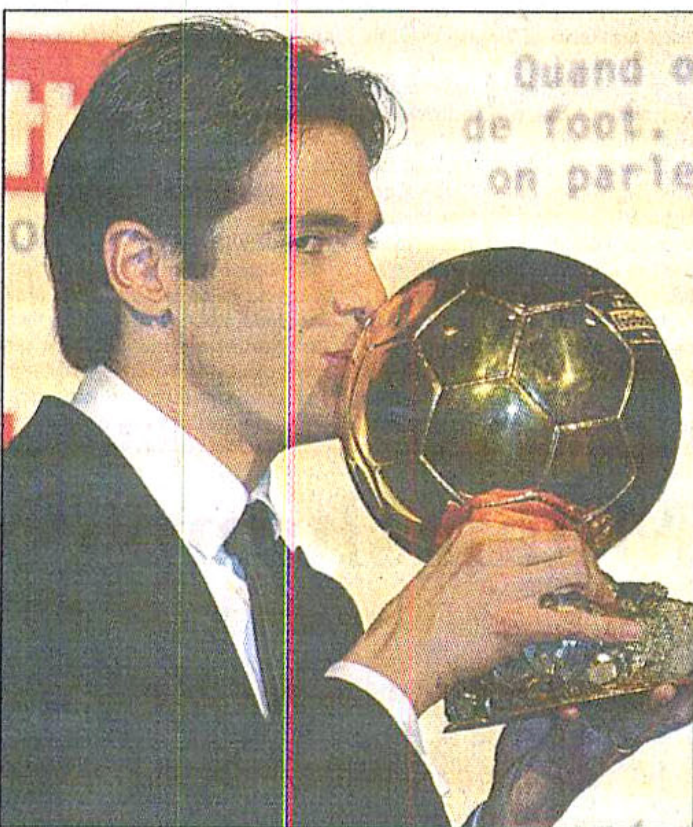
"It's a great honour as the wife of Kaka to be at this ceremony. I know how important it was for my husband to win this trophy," said Caroline.

"This is a great achievement. Ever since he was young I saw our

son dedicate himself," added Cristina.

Born in the capital Brasilia, Kaka started off with Sao Paulo before moving to Europe with AC Milan in 2003. He has been capped 54 times for his country and scored 19 goals.

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Brazilian midfielder Kaka kisses the trophy after winning the prestigious Ballon d'Or award in Boulogne-Billancourt outside Paris on Sunday.

## USA lift Davis Cup

AFP, Portland

The United States captured the Davis Cup on Saturday, dethroning defending champions Russia to end a 12-year drought in the international tennis competition.

A doubles victory by Bob and Mike Bryan gave the Americans an unbeatable 3-0 lead over Russia in the best-of-five match World Group final.

The outcome had seemed all but inevitable after Andy Roddick and James Blake posted singles victories on Friday.

Although the United States boast the most Davis Cup titles of any nation - a tally that now stands at 32 - their last victory had come in 1995 when a Pete Sampras-led team defeated Russia in the final.

While the triumph ended a national dry spell, it also marked the end of a passionate personal journey for this particular Davis Cup squad, captained by Patrick McEnroe.

"I couldn't be happier for these guys because they've been through it all together. It feels absolutely awesome," said McEnroe, who took over the captaincy in 2001.

Roddick began his Davis Cup career the same year and has missed just one tie since, that because of injury. Blake, too, made his Davis Cup debut in 2001, but missed 2004 because of injury and illness.

"It has been a long road," Roddick said. "To be here and bring the Cup back to the United States is amazing. I feel like we really do deserve it. We've been the ultimate team."

The Bryan twins, who finished 2007 as the No. 1 doubles team in the world for the third straight year, delivered the third point with a 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 6-2 victory over Nikolay Davydenko and Igor Andreev.

### VOTE RESULTS

The France Football vote for the Ballon d'Or Player of the Year award:

1. Kaka (BRA), 444 pts
2. Cristiano Ronaldo (POR), 277 pts
3. Lionel Messi (ARG), 255 pts
4. Didier Drogba (CIV), 108 pts
5. Andrea Pirlo (ITA), 41 pts
6. Ruud van Nistelrooy (NED), 39 pts
7. Zlatan Ibrahimovic (SWE), 31 pts
8. Cesc Fabregas (ESP), 27 pts
9. Robinho (BRA), 24 pts
10. Francesco Totti (ITA), 20 pts



German legend Juergen Klinsmann (C) is all smiles as he holds Italy's ballot paper next to Didier Deschamps (L) of France and Peter Schmeichel of Denmark during the Euro 2008 final draw in Lucerne on Sunday.

## Dutch death for Italy, France

AFP, Lucerne



World champions Italy were pitted against old foes France in the draw for the Euro 2008 finals made here on Sunday.

The pair, who clashed in last year's World Cup final and again in qualifying for next year's European championships, were joined by the Netherlands and Romania in Group C, inevitably handed the tag of the dreaded group of death.

France manager Raymond Domenech's face dropped when Italy's name was drawn while Italian manager Roberto Donadoni sported a resigned smile.

The Italians, who failed to make it past the group stages at Euro 2004, open their campaign against the Dutch in Bern on June 9, with the French waiting for them in Zurich four days later.

France and Italy have proved virtually inseparable recently, the pair's paths crossing in Berlin in June 2006 with the World Cup final which the Azzurri won on penalties after Zinedine Zidane's sending off.

Then again in Euro 2008 qualifying where the pair edged through their group at the main expense of Scotland.

The top seeds in the group

however will be the Dutch and manager Marco Van Basten said it could not have been a tougher draw for his side.

"That really is a hard one," he said. "We will go back up against The Romanians who posed us so many problems in the qualifiers and before that we will have to open against Italy and then have

won four European titles between them.

There was a Christmas mood in this Swiss lakeside city outside and the festive spirit spilled into the conference hall where the draw was staged, at least as far as Germany were concerned.

Joachim Loew's side avoided all the big guns and the Mannschaft

Germany's general manager Oliver Bierhoff said that he was happy with the draw.

"They are three good teams and they have won the right to play in the finals," he told German television. "It will be tough for us to play the hosts Austria but we are happy because we have avoided the group of death."

"Our opening game against Poland will be tough. We played against them in the 2006 World Cup and we must not underestimate them. But it is Croatia who are the biggest threat to us."

The opening match in Basel sees Switzerland face former winners the Czech Republic.

Holders Greece will come up against Spain, Russia and Sweden, with their manager, Otto Reihagel, saying: "All these teams are first class; they've all proved their strength in qualifying."

Luis Aragones, Spain's veteran coach, was playing his cards close to his chest, simply saying: "There's nothing for it but to compete."

The June 7-29 competition is co-hosted in Austria and Switzerland with matches being staged in eight cities - Basle, Zurich, Bern and Geneva, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, and Vienna's Ernst-Happel stadium where the final will be played.

The official motto for Euro 2008 is 'Expect Emotions' - and after Sunday's draw that now looks guaranteed.

GROUP A		GROUP B	
1. SWITZERLAND		1. AUSTRIA	
2. CZECH REPUBLIC		2. CROATIA	
3. PORTUGAL		3. GERMANY	
4. TURKEY		4. POLAND	
GROUP C		GROUP D	
1. NETHERLANDS		1. GREECE	
2. ITALY		2. SWEDEN	
3. ROMANIA		3. SPAIN	
4. FRANCE		4. RUSSIA	

France. At least we know what we are up against."

Sunday's draw was preceded by a ceremony featuring the Vienna Boys Choir and Jose Carrera but for Romania, having the three European superpowers as company was hardly music to their ears.

Quarterfinalists in 2000 they will not thank UEFA's balls for pitting them against three teams that have

will be hardly quaking in their boots at the prospect of facing debutants Poland and Austria, the co-hosts who are rated below Haiti in FIFA's world rankings.

Croatia though, the fourth members of Group B, will demand respect after their impressive showing in qualifying as their group leaders, knocking out England in the process.

## Ronaldo fit for Japan

AFP, Milan

Brazil forward Ronaldo will be fit to return to the AC Milan squad when they compete in the Club World Cup in Japan, vice-president Adriano Galliani said on Saturday.

Speaking to Sky Sport television cameras ahead of the crunch Serie A clash against Juventus, Galliani insisted that Tuesday's Champions League match against Celtic would come too soon for Ronaldo but that he could play on December 13 in the global tournament semifinal.

Ronaldo's long awaited comeback from a thigh injury lasted only a single game after he played against Cagliari last weekend only to get injured in midweek.

"I report what the doctors tell me: for Ronaldo the problem is a pull ... not a tear. It's a small thing," said Galliani.

"Next week Ronaldo would have to be in a position to train and to be ready (to play). I wouldn't say (he will be) on Tuesday in the Champions League, but for Japan, yes."

## Rio backs Jose

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand has backed Jose Mourinho to be the next England manager.

The Football Association are currently consulting senior figures in the domestic and international game over who should succeed Steve McClaren as national team boss following the failure to qualify for Euro 2008.

The FA insist no individual has yet been approached with a view to being offered the job, but former Chelsea boss Mourinho has been touted as one of the front-runners.

Asked for his thoughts on Mourinho as England manager, Ferdinand told the Daily Star

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## Bremen trump Hamburg

AFP, Berlin



Werder Bremen beat close rivals Hamburg 2-1 to jump to the top of the German league table on Saturday.

Bayern, at the top of the league virtually all season, would grab back the initiative with a victory at lowly Arminia Bielefeld on Sunday. Bremen have 33 points to Bayern's 31 with third-placed Hamburg on 30.

Bremen will surely be relishing their night of celebration though. Against a Hamburg side who are serious title challengers, Bremen held on with a winner from Finnish defender Petri Pasanen midway through the second half.

Hamburg coach Huub Stevens

also congratulated Bremen. "The best team won -- the freshest team physically too," said Stevens, whose team beat French side Rennes in the UEFA Cup 48 hours earlier.

Bayern meanwhile have not been at their best recently and could only manage a 1-1 draw against Portuguese side Braga in the UEFA Cup on Thursday.

Captain and keeper Oliver Kahn said he regretted a "lack of passion" shown by his teammates.

However Bayer Leverkusen have been gaining victory after victory lately and are approaching the leading trio. Leverkusen beat Hertha Berlin 3-0, leaving them six points behind the leaders.

At the other end of the table, Energie Cottbus won for only the second time this season, beating Karlsruhe 2-0, leaving Duisburg -- who host another relegation candidate Nuremberg on Sunday -- in bottom spot.

## Mancini writes off Fiorentina

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini said Saturday that it would be too early for Fiorentina to challenge for the title this season.

Cesare Prandelli's young team have earned many plaudits this season for belying their relative youth by keeping pace with the Serie A pace-setters.

They lie fifth at the moment but just four points behind champions and leaders Inter and only a single point off second-placed Juventus.

Conceivably at the end of the

weekend's action, the Viola could lie second and only a point off top spot, if results go their way.

Mancini has been impressed with Fiorentina this season but ahead of the pair's clash in Florence on Sunday, he doesn't believe that Fiorentina pose a realistic threat to his own team's title chances, just yet.

"It will be a very difficult match. We'll need to play really well and if we overcome this obstacle, something which won't be easy, it would be very important in terms of the difficult challenges that lie ahead of us," said Mancini.

"I don't know if they are ready to be competitive right now, playing in the championship and the cup can be difficult and get very tiring

over the long run.

"For sure in the years to come they will become a great squad and certainly now they are a dangerous one."

"The championship? When you have a lot of young players, sometimes you lack a bit of consistency. However, if they stay together for many years, they have the nucleus to be very strong."

Mancini also admitted that he feared Fiorentina's veteran former Inter forward Christian Vieri.

"He seems to be stronger physically now," said Mancini of the injury-plagued former Italy front-man.

"Maybe against Inter he will want to give something extra but he has always been someone who gives everything on the pitch."

## BENTLEY STEALS LIMELIGHT Arsenal stay clear atop

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger believes Arsenal proved they have the character as well as the quality needed to win the Premier League after their 2-1 victory at Aston Villa.

Emmanuel Adebayor's first half header sent Wenger's side five points clear at the top after Mathieu Flamini had cancelled out Craig Gardner's opener for Villa.

The Gunners turned on the style in the first half but it was their resilient display as Villa pressed after the break that impressed Wenger more.

"The first half was amazing. It was a classy display," he said. "In the second half we were resilient and showed a different side to our

game. That means commitment and character."

"We dealt well with the pressure. It was an interesting game that showed a different side to us."

"I feel we were really tested. We were 1-0 down against a team full of confidence and quality. We deserve a lot of credit for coming out with the points."

The only dark cloud for Wenger was an injury to Alexander Hleb following a hasty tackle by John Carew that could keep him out of Wednesday's match at Newcastle.

"It was a bad tackle. I don't know how bad it is but it looks to be a kick on his Achilles."

Chelsea's resurgence continued as Joe Cole's late goal clinched a hard-fought 1-0 win against West Ham.

Cole broke his former club's resistance in the 76th minute when he ran on to Salomon Kalou's flick

and just beat the offside trap before rounding Robert Green and shooting high into the roof of the net.

Avram Grant's side were well below their best at Stamford Bridge but produced a gritty performance that extended their unbeaten run to 14 matches.

Grant was unhappy with West Ham's physical approach and said: "In the first half we had to be busy reacting to their aggressive game, which we had been expecting, but in the second half we played our game and went on to win."

Steve Bruce made an instant impact on Wigan as he started his reign with a 1-1 draw against Manchester City at the JJB Stadium.

Bruce was taking charge of his first match following his protracted move from Birmingham and was able to stop Wigan's run of eight successive defeats.

It had looked like being a

depressing day for Bruce as high-flying City took the lead in the first minute.

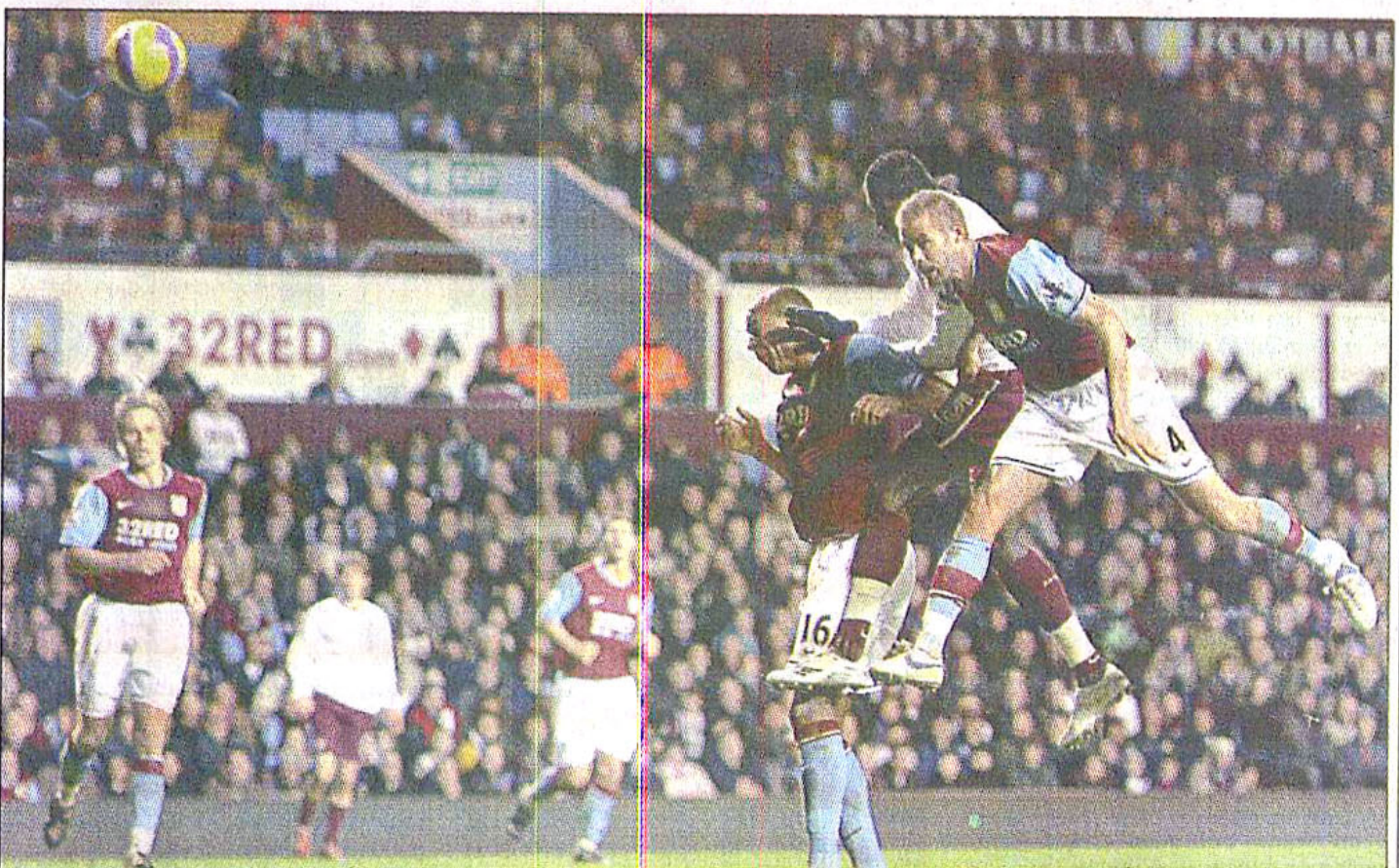
Titus Bramble's miscued clearance let in Giovanni and the Brazilian rounded Chris Kirkland before slotting home. But Wigan hit back after 25 minutes when Paul Scharner met Jason Koumas's cross with a diving header.

Bruce was made to sweat for his point as defender Mario Melchiot was sent off for violent conduct in the final minutes but the hosts held on.

"I certainly could not have imagined a worse start," Bruce said. "It was horrific but in fairness the lads could have folded but they had the courage to make a fist of it after that."

David Bentley increased the pressure on Sam Allardyce as the Blackburn winger's double strike set up a 3-1 win over Newcastle.

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Arsenal striker Emmanuel Adebayor (2nd R) climbs over his marker to head home the second goal against Aston Villa during their Premier league match at Villa Park on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP