

## Laporta denies Ronaldinho rift

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona president Joan Laporta has moved to quash speculation about a rift between the club and out-of-form Ronaldinho.

"There is no divorce between Barcelona and Ronaldinho," Laporta was quoted as saying by Spanish media on Wednesday.

"We hope Ronaldinho will be back as soon as possible, but at the moment he is suffering some pain and we have to respect that. While he has got this pain we can't count on him."

A succession of injury and fitness problems and media speculation about night-time partying have led to reports that Barcelona are prepared to offload the former World Player of the Year at the end of the season.

But Laporta insisted that the 28-year-old Brazilian was still part of coach Frank Rijkaard's plans.

"The coach would like to have Ronaldinho at his disposal, but if that isn't possible we will just have to carry on without him," he said.

"Right now we have to look to the team rather than any individuals. The players that aren't playing should do all they can to recover and be available for the coach."

"At this stage of the season the strength of the whole team is the most important thing."

Barcelona have won just one of their last four Primera Liga matches but are only four points behind leaders Real Madrid with nine matches left to play.

They play Real Betis in the league on Saturday and meet Schalke 04 in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal next Tuesday.

## Homophobic awareness

AFP, Vienna

With just over two months to go before the Euro 2008 football championships start, a Vienna-based gay and lesbian group has launched a poster competition to draw attention to the homophobic side of the sport.

"Football is the last bastion, where the clichés about 'real men' can be lived out, on the field as well in the fan sections," said Qwien, the centre for gay and lesbian history and culture, in a statement.

"Bad play is termed 'feminine', hesitant or poor players are called 'sissies' or 'faggots' and the opponents berated as 'fags'."

"This kind of outright macho behaviour is common practice and not only in Austrian stadiums," Qwien said.

The group said that statistics showed that one person out of every 20 was homosexual and that meant that out of the 500 professional footballers in Austria, 25 should be gay.

"However, there is not one gay professional player in Austria who openly admits his homosexuality," Qwien said.

With the European championships to be held in Austria and Switzerland this summer, Qwien said it wanted to draw attention to homophobia in football.

"By launching a Europe-wide poster competition, we will make an otherwise taboo topic public" during the championships, it said.

Posters had to be submitted by the end of May.

The best 50 would be selected and then a jury - including Icelandic film director Robert Douglas, Life Ball organiser Gery Keszler, the president of Hamburg's FC St. Pauli football club Corny Littmann, pop singer Jimmy Somerville and Tanja Walther of the European Gay and Lesbian Sports Federation - would pick the best three.

The winner would be announced on June 4. The 50 best posters would be displayed "at a public venue" during the championship itself, which runs from June 7-29.

## Matthaus set for return

INTERNET, undated

Former Germany international Lothar Matthaus is preparing to return to club management in July when he obtains his coaching badge.

The 47-year-old left Austrian champions SV Salzburg, where he was co-trainer with Giovanni Trapattoni, last year and has been out of work since.

He has used the time to complete a training course in Germany to be able to coach in the Bundesliga and revealed he is set to take on his first job in his homeland after previous spells in charge of the Hungarian national team and Red Star Belgrade.

"I will take over as coach at a club in July," he told DSF television.

Matthaus also revealed that several clubs have already approached him and that talks were at an advanced stage with one interested party.

"It is a club which has potential, also in European club competitions," he revealed.



Australia goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer (lying in ground) saves a penalty from China midfielder Shao Jiayi (C) as Australian counterpuncher Jason Culina looks on during their 2010 World Cup qualifier in Kunming on Wednesday.

## China rue penalty miss

AFP, Hong Kong

China held Australia and the two Koreans also fought to a goalless draw as Asian World Cup qualifying stepped up a gear on Wednesday.

China's Shao Jiayi had a last-gasp penalty saved and South Korea were frustrated by the North's stubborn defence as some of Asia's top teams failed to find the net.

Group 1 favourites Australia remain provisionally top of the "Group of Death" with Asian champions Iraq playing Qatar later in the second round of matches Wednesday.

South Korea stay ahead of the North in Group 3 on goal difference, with both in line to qualify ahead of Turkmenistan and Jordan, who are another later kick-off.

Japan, Asia's top-ranked team, were set to play in Bahrain while Iran take their bid for a fourth World Cup appearance to Kuwait. Thailand were beaten 1-0 by Oman as their hopes took a tumble.

Chinese midfielder Shao was distraught after scuffing his pen-

alty in the dying minutes against Australia in front of 32,500 baying home fans in Kunming.

Goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer dived low to his left in the 88th minute to block Shao's shot as Australia escaped the tricky tie with a point.

"I must apologise to the team and the fans for that penalty kick," Shao said.

"Because of me we didn't win the game. We should have won the game but we didn't because I missed the penalty kick. I really feel bad about this."

Australia should have been firm favourites but they had only two days to acclimatise to Kunming's 1,900-metre (6,233-foot) altitude and a long injury list including Everton's Tim Cahill and Celtic striker Scott McDonald.

Given the difficulties, coach Pim Verbeek was happy with the result, which maintained his unbeaten record and kept Australia on course for South Africa 2010.

"We knew that this would be a difficult game, but our boys were well prepared," said the Dutchman.

"The boys played very hard to get this result. Of course we came here to win because everyone likes

to win games. But I have to admit, I can live with this result."

Meanwhile, South Korea were kept out by stout North Korean defence as their much-anticipated showdown also ended in a goalless stalemate.

The South, despite fielding top stars such as Manchester United's Park Ji-Sung, failed to convert a series of chances in the Cold War clash, which was moved from Pyongyang to Shanghai in a row over flags and anthems.

Fulham's Seol Ki-Hyeon, Cho Won-Hee and Park Chu-Young all went close for South Korea, while the North's Jong Tae-Se, "Asia's Wayne Rooney," had a close-range shot deflected wide.

World governing body FIFA ordered the move to China after fiercely patriotic North Korean officials refused to let the South use their flag and anthem in Kim Il-Sung Stadium.

The two countries, separated by the world's last Cold War frontier, are still yet to sign a peace treaty following the 1950-1953 war which divided the Korean peninsula.

The top two teams from each of five groups will reach the fourth and final Asian qualifying round for the 2010 tournament.

## Atletico slam fan beating

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid defender Pablo Ibanez condemned Tuesday the beating of a club supporter by Sevilla fans before the two sides' weekend match in an incident caught on tape and shown on television.

"They are deplorable incidents that have no place in football and should not be allowed to happen again," the 26-year-old told a news conference.

"There is tension on the pitch of course, it is normal, but outside of the pitch it is another game and you have to know how to win and lose," he added.

Images taken on a mobile telephone and broadcast on the Internet and on television showed a man being insulted and attacked as he lay bleeding on the sidewalk outside of Sevilla's Sanchez Pizjuan stadium just hours before the Spanish league match on Saturday.

No police complaint was filed but the authorities are using the images to try to identify the culprits, private radio Cadena Ser reported.

Atletico beat Sevilla 2-1. Both sides are competing for the Spanish league's final automatic qualification to play in the Champions League and the win extended Atletico's fourth-place lead over Sevilla and Espanyol to five points.

Sevilla reached the first knockout stage of Europe's top-tier competition this season and is hoping to return.

Earlier this month Athletic Bilbao goalkeeper Armando Ribero required stitches after he was hit below the right eye by a plastic bottle tossed from the stands during an away match against Sevilla's cross-town rivals Real Betis.

The match was suspended seven minutes later with Athletic leading 2-1.

## Loew lays down the law

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew has imposed a few ground rules on his players in their quest to win Euro 2008 - late-night visits to discos are banned and room service in the team hotels is off the menu.

Until the Bundesliga finishes in May, members of the Germany squad are banned from visiting discos or nightclubs on the eve of a league game as Loew demands discipline in the bid to win the European crown for the fourth time.

And the Germany squad will also find the mini bar in their hotel rooms stripped of beer, wine and spirits with only sports drinks and water available.

Players have been told room service is banned both in the team's Euro 2008 training camp in Mallorca and in the team hotel at Ascona, Switzerland, during Euro 2008, between June 8-29.

"It's about the relations between the national football team and the clubs," said Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff.

"Anyone who is out until the early hours of the morning isn't taking their job seriously."

Hotel staff in both Mallorca and Ascona are under strict instructions not to provide room service to the players who will have their own personal chef for the duration of the tournament.

"Of course we trust the players. The mini bar is filled with fruit juices and water," said Bierhoff.

"The players will have round the clock access to the best nutrition and a balanced diet."

Germany play Poland, Croatia and co-hosts Austria in their Euro 2008 pool.

## Marcelinho under the cosh

AFP, Berlin

Brazilian international Marcelinho is under investigation by German police and faces a possible grievous bodily harm charge following a late-night attack in a Berlin nightclub.

German tabloid Bild reported the 32-year-old VfL Wolfsburg midfielder, who has five caps for Brazil and scored one goal, is being investigated after a 44-year-old man received five stitches in a head wound in the early hours of Easter Monday.

The man reported the incident to the police and a spokesman confirmed an investigation has been launched.

The incident at the Cazz Club in Charlottenburg left the man - simply known as Ingo H - covered in blood and he received treatment at a hospital in the suburb of Kreuzberg.

The man claims he was attacked by the Brazilian star with a beer bottle after a disagreement, but Marcelinho is adamant he did nothing wrong.

"The man provoked me and there was a set to," the Brazilian told Bild.

"If this man wants to go to the police, the matter will be clarified by the police."

## Idle idol set for exit

INTERNET, undated



Barcelona have practically given up hope of recuperating Ronaldinho from his indolence and lethargy. This is the dramatic interpretation that the Spanish media have placed on Tuesday's night board meeting at the Catalan giants, at which the present and future Brazilian playmaker was top of the agenda.

According to Marca, "the Brazilian will leave the club at the end of the season", because the Barca directors "know that he goes out too often at night and they don't see him with either the desire or the determination to struggle to be the player that he once was."

Marca said that Barca are now regretting not having sold Ronaldinho, 28, last summer, as Sandro Rosell - the man who masterminded his signing from Paris Saint-Germain in 2003 - advised them to do.

An online poll taken by Marca - in which 5,016 readers had voted by Wednesday morning - showed that only 15.21 per cent of readers

believe that Barca should keep him until the end of his contract, in 2010.

But 69.64 per cent think that Barca should sell him off before his market value falls any further, and 15.15 per cent think that he should be given a free transfer, in order to avoid paying his astronomical salary for two more years.

This is exactly what Barca did in 2002 with a former Brazilian idol turned idle - Rivaldo, who left for AC Milan on a free transfer.

Ronaldinho - FIFA World Player and European Footballer of the Year in 2005 - has started only 13 Liga matches for Barca this season, and has appeared four times as a late substitute. He has scored just eight league goals, his lowest tally at Barca.

He claimed injuries on several occasions, though a report last week from the club doctors said that they could find no proper injury at all in his right leg.

Catalan daily Sport is, understandably, even more worried about Ronaldinho than Marca.

Their headline on Wednesday is "What Will Happen With Ronaldinho?"

Sport columnist Josep Maria Casanovas claims that the goofy playmaker is "destroying his

future", and that Brazil national manager Dunga is also losing patience with him.

Sport claims that two resolutions were agreed upon at the board meeting: that no director would discuss Ronaldinho in public, in order to avoid an acrimonious public debate, and that no definitive decision would be taken until June 30.

According to Sport, "what was made clear (at the meeting) was that the club could not really do much more for Ronaldinho, in human and professional terms. The club has worked hard to protect him, and to always talk well about him..."

On Wednesday, the AS website quoted Barca president Joan Laporta as denying that "there is a divorce between Barcelona and Ronaldinho."

But, according to the Catalan media, most Barca fans are losing patience with Ronaldinho and are resigned to him leaving.

However, at the same time, fans' blogs and websites are expressing the fear that he might be snapped up by deadly rivals Real Madrid, as happened to fading Barca stars Bernd Schuster in 1998 and Michael Laudrup in 2004.

## Record on Frei's mind

Football

REUTERS, Basel

Captain Alex Frei said on Tuesday he was aiming to become Switzerland's all-time highest goalscorer before the start of Euro 2008.

Frei, 28, moved to within two goals of equalling Kubilay Tuerkylmaz's tally of 34 goals for Switzerland when he scored a penalty against Colombia in March 2007.

Hip and calf operations then put the Borussia Dortmund striker's international career on hold for a year. He is expected to return to Switzerland's starting line-up for a friendly against Germany in his home city of Basel on Wednesday.

"Now that I'm on 32 goals, I'm certainly not running around all day thinking about what it will be like when I break the record," Frei said. "But the nearer I get to it the

more I get that feeling of being close to a place in Swiss football history."

"For me personally it would be an advantage if I could break the record before Euro 2008 starts because that would take off some of the pressure."

"There will be pressure for all of us at the tournament anyway, but breaking the record would mean ending the pressure of finding the answer to the question of when exactly I will do it."

Adding extra significance to Frei's record bid are the links between him and Tuerkylmaz. At the age of 15, Frei was in the crowd at Wembley when Tuerkylmaz stunned England with a penalty equaliser in the opening game of Euro 96.

Five years later they were team mates at FC Lucerne.

"I have never spoken to him about the record itself but what I have told him is how grateful I am for the start he gave me at Lucerne,

all the tips I got and how as a 20-year-old I was just able to watch and learn from him."

"I also know that he is very happy and flattered that I'm the one who could break his record some time soon."

Following the game against Germany, Frei will have two further opportunities to add to his haul before Euro 2008 with Switzerland due to host Slovakia and Liechtenstein as part of their final preparations for the June tournament.

The Swiss, who are co-hosting Euro 2008 with neighbouring Austria, will play all three of their group games in Basel against the Czech Republic, Turkey and Portugal.

"The game against Germany will be very important for the team because it will be so similar to our first group match - against the Czechs - we'll be playing in Basel in front of a sell-out crowd, and against world class opposition."

## Rafa wants to meet chieftain

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez wants to meet with Premier League referees boss Keith Hackett following the controversial sending-off of Javier Mascherano at Old Trafford.

Mascherano was ordered off the field by Steve Bennett for showing dissent and Benitez, while accepting his player was wrong to argue with the official, fears an excessive example may be made of the Argentina midfielder following the launch of the FA's 'Respect' campaign.

This is designed to improve player behaviour towards officials at all levels. Although Benitez has no problem with the principle, he fears the FA may come under pressure to extend what would normally be a one-game ban to three.

The FA have yet to announce the extent of Mascherano's punishment and the way in which he had to be all but dragged off the field by the Liverpool coaching staff after being sent-off could be used as a justification for a more severe punishment.

Benitez also stressed on Tuesday how Mascherano was the first Liverpool player to be sent off this season.

Both the Liverpool manager and Mascherano himself have since insisted that all the Argentinian was trying to do was ask why teammate Fernando Torres, who was also booked, was not receiving greater protection from the referee having been fouled in a match Liverpool went on to lose 3-0.

"I would like to speak to Keith Hackett, because it is important that we find a solution," Benitez told Liverpool's official website.

"At Liverpool, we respect the game; we respect the rules and we respect the referee - and it is important to remember that Mascherano was the first Liverpool player to be sent off in the league this season."

Mascherano, if a one-game ban is imposed, will miss this Sunday's Merseyside derby against Everton.

But any extension, which could rule the player, currently in Egypt with the Argentina squad, out of the games with Arsenal and Blackburn. That would likely trigger a demand for a personal hearing by Liverpool which in itself would delay the imposition of a ban.

Liverpool are currently fourth in the table, just two points ahead of Everton - their closest challenges for the fourth and final English qualifying place for next season's Champions League.

## QPR sign mega deal

Football

AFP, London

Queens Park Rangers co-owner Flavio Briatore insisted the club would not "throw away their money" on new players despite announcing a five-year, 20 million pounds (40 million dollars) sponsorship deal with Italian sporting goods manufacturers Lotto on Tuesday.

The agreement is an impressive one for a club such as QPR who are still seven points adrift of the play-off places in English football's Championship, the division below the top-flight Premier League.

It was the latest example of the money that has poured into the west London club since Briatore, owner of the Renault Formula One team and Grand Prix supreme Bernie Ecclestone took over at Loftus Road in November, with the team then languishing at the bottom of the table in English football's second tier.

The cash injection provided by the motor racing duo was bolstered in December when Indian steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, described as the wealthiest man in Britain by the Sunday Times rich list with a fortune estimated at

19.25 billion pounds, took a 20 per cent stake in QPR.

Rangers' new found-wealth has drawn comparisons with west London rivals Chelsea where Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich has bankrolled a series of expensive signings who've in turn helped bring silverware to Stamford Bridge.

But Chelsea were already in the Premier League when Abramovich took over and Briatore was adamant the QPR board wanted to put in place a plan for the sustainable development of the side.

"We are not going to throw away money at all," he said. "QPR is QPR, Chelsea is Chelsea - we will do it our way," added Briatore, whose side were beaten 1-0 by their big-spending local rivals in the FA Cup in January.

Eight players arrived at Loftus Road during the January transfer window and Amit Bhatta, QPR Holdings' vice-chairman and Mittal's son-in-law, admitted: "We have a wish list."

But Briatore stressed that would remain private. "If we say which players we want, the price is 10 times bigger. When somebody arrives in the business people say that it is new blood to suck. There is nothing to suck here. We don't have blood."

The Italian added: "We want to consolidate the club and create a base. This year our goal is to stay in the Championship. We need to do it step by step."

"You want to start from the bottom and create a new club, this is exciting. It's a new adventure."

Long-term, the club will need a ground with a bigger capacity than the less than 19,000 maximum of Loftus Road if it is to compete with London giants Arsenal and Tottenham.

But Briatore said that even if the club did build a new ground, it would not stray far from its current Shepherds Bush base, which he said was a key part of QPR's attraction.

"It is a club in the middle of London - probably the best location in the city. The club has a story behind it and a lot of potential as we've seen already."

QPR last played in the Premier League in 1996 and dropped down to the third tier of English football before returning to the Championship in 2004.

The only major trophy they have won was the 1967 League Cup. They did come close to being crowned champions of England in 1976, finishing runners-up by just a point behind a powerful Liverpool team.

## Rio to follow Roy model

Football

INTERNET, undated

Rio Ferdinand has hailed Roy Keane as the perfect captain as he prepares to skipper England for the first time in the friendly international with France in Paris.

Ferdinand has first-hand knowledge of Keane's leadership skills at Manchester United before he made the switch to management with Sunderland.

Now the central defender will lead out Fabio Capello's side at the Stade de France as the Italian continued his policy of rotating the captain's armband.

Ferdinand said: "Roy Keane was a fantastic captain. He led by example and played ever so well, getting marks of seven, eight or nine out of 10 every game."

"He was a man amongst men and, if questions need to be answered he was normally the first or second person to do that. He was

a great captain and symbolic of Manchester United."

"Now for me to get the captaincy for my country is a dream come true and this is the biggest honour I've ever had."

"Of course, winning titles is unbelievable as well but I don't think you can compare the two to be honest. This is a great honour in itself."

"How many people are named as England captain? Not many and to be named alongside list of illustrious players is a great achievement in itself."

"I'll be wearing that armband with as much pride as anyone in the past."

Ferdinand is aware he will have his detractors because of past misdemeanours including failing to attend a drugs test at United's training ground four years ago which resulted in an eight month ban.

He said: "I think everyone goes through ups and downs, not only in their careers but in their lives. It is

how you come out of those situations that is important."

"Do you learn, do you take things on board and use it to your advantage in whichever way you can? I feel I've applied myself in the right manner whenever a situation has gone against me - and I will continue to do that."

"What do I say to people who say I shouldn't be captain? The easiest way to say it is the past is the past. People move on in their lives and mature, step up to the plate and become better people for having been through those situations."

"If someone does something wrong in their life, do you shut the door on them totally? I don't think that is the right way."

"I am sure this manager hasn't looked into the past and taken things in the past into account. He sees what he sees in the present and he deems me the man at the moment to wear the armband."