

Scolari snubs Maniche

AFP, Viseu

Inter Milan midfielder Maniche was the surprise absentee from the Portuguese squad selected by coach Felipe Scolari for the Euro 2008 finals which are being co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland and runs from June 7-29.

Maniche, who was an integral part of the Portuguese teams under Scolari that reached the Euro 2004 final where they lost to Greece and the 2006 World Cup semifinals, can seek some consolation next week-end should Inter hold onto their slender lead over AS Roma in the Serie A title race in the final match of the season.

Ironically Maniche's brother Jorge Ribeiro was given the nod by Scolari ahead of Valencia defender Marco Caneira.

"I have total confidence in the choices I have made and in the abilities of the players I have chosen," said Scolari, who guided Brazil to the 2002 World Cup title.

Reserve goalkeeper Rui Patrício is the only player in the squad who up till now has never been selected by Scolari.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Ricardo (Real Betis/ESP), Quim (Benfica), Rui Patrício (Sporting Lisbon)

Defenders: Ricardo Carvalho (Chelsea/ENG), Pepe (Real Madrid/ESP), Bruno Alves (FC Porto), Fernando Meira (VfB Stuttgart/GER), Jose Bosingwa (Chelsea/ENG), Paulo Ferreira (Chelsea/ENG), Miguel (Valencia/ESP), Jorge Ribeiro (Boavista)

Midfielders: Petit (Benfica), Miguel Veloso (Sporting Lisbon), Raul Meireles (FC Porto), Joao Moutinho (Sporting Lisbon), Deco (FC Barcelona/ESP)

Forwards: Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United/ENG), Nani (Manchester United/ENG), Ricardo Quaresma (FC Porto), Simão Sabrosa (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Nuno Gomes (Benfica), Hugo Almeida (Werder Bremen/GER), Helder Postiga (Panathinaikos/GRE)

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Maniche (Inter Milan/ITA) was not included in the squad.

Zenit target glory

AFP, Saint Petersburg



Russian champions Zenit St Petersburg are out to cap a memorable run in the UEFA Cup with victory in Wednesday's final in Manchester against Scotland's Glasgow Rangers.

The club, which was founded in May 1925 at the metallurgical plant named after the Soviet Union's communist leader Joseph Stalin, reached their first ever Euro cup final and stand just one game away from making history.

"For me it is important to win," Zenit's head coach, Dick Advocaat, said in a recent interview. "Nothing else matters!"

"Having come so far we have to win the final," the 60-year-old Dutchman added. "We are one game away from making history."

"I told the players: If we have one chance to win the UEFA Cup, this is it. With the quality we have shown and the way we played against Villarreal, Marseille and Leverkusen, we can play against anyone."

"And they showed that against Bayern."

Zenit have never previously put on such glittering performances at home and in Europe, either in the Soviet era or in the post-Soviet period.

The side won their only Soviet league title in 1984 but after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 they managed to come close to the domestic title only once in 2003, when they finished second.

Zenit were in desperate need of the wisdom, experience and coaching talent of Advocaat, who took over the team in June 2006 and quickly led it to their first ever Russian title the following year.

Zenit's recently appointed president Alexander Dyukov, who is also a top executive with Gazprom and heads the metallurgical giant Sibur's board of directors, said he considered Advocaat to be one of the best European football managers.

"Advocaat is one of the best European coaches and I'm very pleased with his work in the club," Dyukov said. "He's a true professional and is working 15-16 hours a day without any days-off."

"His contract expires at the end of the year but we hope to prolong the deal. Advocaat is a top specialist and it will be very hard to find a worthy substitute for him should he decide to step down."

However, Dyukov has plenty of opportunities to strike a new deal with Advocaat by making the Dutchman an offer that he would find hard to turn down.

The side is sponsored by the Russian gas giant Gazprom along with Sibur and the Sogaz insurance companies group, while Saint Petersburg's Gazprombank is the club's biggest shareholder.

Their joint financial support

transformed Zenit into a very competitive bidder in the transfer market.

Last year the Saint Petersburg club set a new Russian transfer record after they signed Ukrainian international midfielder Anatoly Tymoshchuk from Shakhtar Donetsk for 20 million euros.

Zenit officials and fans unanimously consider that Tymoshchuk is worth every penny they paid for him.

Soon after he joined Zenit, Tymoshchuk's skills and efficiency set him apart as the club's charismatic leader and left Advocaat no choice but to appoint the 29-year-old Ukrainian the team's skipper.

Russian international striker Pavel Pogrebnyak became another surprise discovery of the season.

The 24-year-old Russian international striker, raised in Spartak Moscow's football school, is enjoying a career-best season so far, sharing the lead in the UEFA Cup scorers' contest on 10 with Bayern Munich marksman Luca Toni.

Pogrebnyak, who played for Spartak, Kaliningrad, Khimki, Yaroslavl and Tomsk, had never performed with the true killer instinct demanded in top-level play until he was signed by Zenit last year.

The forward, who collected seven cups and scored two goals in the Russian national team, will however miss the UEFA Cup final after being booked in the return semifinal with the German champions Bayern Munich.

Seedorf stuns Van Basten

AFP, Zeist

Dutch coach Marco van Basten admitted on Tuesday to being stunned by veteran Clarence Seedorf's decision not to be considered for selection for the Euro 2008 squad.

Seedorf, 32 and capped 87 times since making his debut in 1994, claimed that van Basten had no confidence in him and therefore it was pointless for him to consider going to the finals, which are being co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland and run from June 7 to 29.

"(He van Basten) does not want me, that is clear," Seedorf told Voetbal International magazine, which is set to come out on Wednesday.

Van Basten for his part was left flabbergasted by Seedorf's decision.

"I was stunned by his announcement," said van Basten, who is due to step down after the finals and take over at Ajax.

"I was not expecting this. I told Clarence that I had a lot of respect for him both as a human being and as a footballer. But his decision was final."

Van Basten, who scored one of the greatest goals in the tournament's history in the Dutch Euro 88 final victory over the then Soviet Union, will reduce his present squad of 29 to 26 on Friday and must decide on his final 23 by May 28.

The Dutch are in the Group of Death, Group C, which features world champions Italy, 2006 World Cup finalists France and dark horses Romania.

C'Ron happy at United

AFP, Manchester

Cristiano Ronaldo has denied reports that he would consider a move to Real Madrid by insisting Manchester United is the perfect club for him.

Real are keen to take Ronaldo to the Bernabeu stadium and reports this week claimed the Portugal winger would listen to an approach from the Spanish champions.

Bernd Schuster's side are said to be considering a 100 million pounds (£125 million euros) offer which would test United's determination to keep English football's two-time Player of the Year.

But Ronaldo insists he has no intention of leaving Old Trafford because he is in the right place to develop his prodigious talent.

"I'm at the right club, playing with the right players and I learn things all the time," Ronaldo told MUTV.

"That's what great about being at United. I improve all the time and I want to improve every season. I think I'm a better player now than five years ago."

"This season has been a great one for me - I've scored a lot of goals, the team have played very well, and we're champions. It's amazing."

Ronaldo's 41-goal haul has helped United retain the title and reach next week's Champions League final and he admits the season has been beyond his wildest dreams.

"It's a great feeling to win the league - I don't have the words to describe how it feels to be champions, it's amazing," he said.

"I didn't think it would go to the final day of the season, but to be honest the feeling is better [to win on the last day]."

"When the ref blew the final whistle it was brilliant. We've worked hard for nine months and I feel very proud to be champions."

Cambiasso out of season finale

AFP, Rome

Argentina midfielder Esteban Cambiasso is out of Inter Milan's final league match of the season against Parma on Sunday due to an ankle injury, Italian press reported on Monday.

The 27-year-old's loss is a big blow to the leaders and champions who have been showing signs of cracking in the title run-in.

Two matches ago they looked stone-cold certain to land a third straight title as they needed only three points from their final three games to be crowned champions.

But they lost the derby against AC Milan and were then held to a 2-2 draw at home by Siena on Sunday.

Drogba fit for Moscow

AFP, Paris

Diego Drogba insists there is no chance he or John Terry will miss Chelsea's Champions League final showdown against Manchester United.

Drogba spent the final minutes of Chelsea's match against Bolton on Sunday limping with a knee injury, but the striker was unable to

come off because Avram Grant had already made all his substitutions.

Blues captain Terry looked in even more trouble when he was taken to hospital with a dislocated elbow suffered during the 1-1 draw. But Terry later returned to Stamford Bridge and Drogba revealed his teammate will join him in the starting line-up in Moscow on May 21.

"I have spoken to him - he will play in Moscow. No-one wants to miss this gigantic match, the match of our careers. That's the case for

me anyway," Drogba told L'Equipe. "I took a blow to my knee that was operated on back in December, and it hurt at the time. I put ice on it immediately. But there is nothing serious. I will be at training this week."

After the disappointment of losing out on the Premier League title to United, Grant's side have a chance for revenge in Russia.

Drogba is convinced Chelsea can repeat last season's FA Cup final victory over United, when the Ivory Coast star scored the winner in extra-time. But he knows the two evenly-matched teams may not be separated until after the extra period again.

"It will play itself out over 90 or 120 minutes, like in the FA Cup final last year," Drogba said.

"We know that we can beat United, we proved it again in the league a fortnight ago."

"But they deserved their title and were rewarded for their consistency. We made too many mistakes."

Drogba's future at the west London club is far from certain after his repeated claims that he wants to leave.

Chelsea are keen to keep the powerful forward but, with AC Milan, Inter Milan and Barcelona all interested, it would be no surprise to see Drogba move on.

"At the moment, the only thing I have in my mind is the final in Moscow," he said. "What will happen in June or July? I still don't know anything," he said.

"I had trouble getting used to Chelsea and I wanted to leave at the end of every season. Not because people were not treating me well, rather because of personal reasons."

"I have started everything again from zero in England. I had to replace a great striker in Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, who was a favourite at the club."

"It wasn't easy but my relationship with the English supporters has evolved."

Photo: AFP

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba waves to the crowd after their Premiership tie against Bolton Wanderers at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Photo: AFP

Swiss gamble on Muller

AFP, Bern



Swiss national football coach Jakob Kuhn said he was taking a gamble by including defender Patrick Muller in his initial Euro 2008 squad released on Tuesday.

The Lyon back is a key member of the Euro 2008 co-hosts' defence but he approaches next month's finals after a season blighted by a knee injury.

"There are still question marks" over Muller, Kuhn told journalists.

Question marks also hover over another of Kuhn's defenders, Philipp Degen of Borussia Dortmund, who has suffered with muscular fibrosis.

Both players will undergo intensive training and medical examinations in the coming week, Kuhn said.

In any case, the Swiss coach will have to whittle down his selection by a further three spots by May 28, the deadline set by European football's governing body UEFA for final team lists to be submitted.

Kuhn said he knew that some players would be disappointed at being left out but he believed he had made the best possible selection.

"Only time will tell if we are able to improve on our showing" at the last Euro championships in Portugal in 2004, he said.

In that competition, Switzerland finished bottom of their group against England, France and Croatia.

Kuhn's boys fared better in the 2006 World Cup in Germany however, reaching the last 16 of the latter before going out on penalties to Ukraine having not conceded a goal in the tournament.

Philippe Senderos of Arsenal made the cut despite suffering intense mental pressure after a bitterly disappointing season with the Gunners, who were left empty-handed for the third consecutive season after Manchester United bagged the Premiership and Liverpool knocked them out of the Champions League.

Senderos is joined in the defenders line-up by fellow Gunner Johan Djourou.

In attack, all eyes will be on Alexander Frei, in the hope he will return to form after a lacklustre season with Borussia Dortmund.

He will be joined by Hakan Yakin of Young Boys Bern, the top goalscorer in this year's Apxo Super League even though his team lost out to rivals FC Basel last weekend in a closely-fought last day decider.

Switzerland are scheduled to attend a training camp in Lugano ahead of their opening Euro 2008 game in Basel against the Czech Republic on June 7.

GOALKEEPERS: Diego Benaglio (Wolfsburg/GER); Fabio Coltorti (Racing Santander/ESP); Pascal Zuberbuehler (Neuchatel Xamax/SUI)

DEFENDERS: Philipp Degen (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Johan Djourou (Arsenal/ENG); Mario Eggimann (Karlsruhe/GER); Stephane Griching (Auxerre/FRA); Stephan Lichtsteiner (Lille/FRA); Ludovic Magnin (Stuttgart/GER); Patrick Mueller (Lyon/FRA); Philippe Senderos (Arsenal/ENG); Christoph Spycher (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER); Steve von Bergen (Hertha Berlin/GER)

MIDFIELDERS: Tranquillo Barnetta (Bayer Leverkusen/GER); Valon Behrami (Lazio/ITA); Riccardo Cabanas (Grasshopper Zurich/SUI); Eren Derdiyok (Basel/SUI); Gelson Fernandes (Man City/ENG);

Attackers: Alexander Frei (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Daniel Gygyax (Metz/FRA); Benjamin Huggel (Basel/SUI); Gokhan Inler (Udinese/ITA); Blaise Nkufo (Twente/NED); Marco Streller (Basel/SUI); Johan Vonlanthen (Red Bull Salzburg/AUS); Hakan Yakin (Young Boys Bern/SUI)

Parma stunningly sacked coach Hector Cuper on Monday with just one match of the season remaining, the club's president Tommaso Ghirardini said.

Cuper was only hired two months ago with Parma already struggling against relegation, just one place above the drop zone.

Under the 52-year-old Argentine's guidance Parma won two matches, drew three and lost five times but they also dropped one place to 18th and need a minor miracle to avoid the drop.

Their host champions Inter Milan on the last day of the season with only a victory giving them any hope of staying up.

On Sunday they took the lead 1-0 at Fiorentina but ended up losing 3-1 and trail 17th-placed Catania by two points.

If the Sicilians beat Roma this weekend, Parma will definitely go down.

Cuper replaced Domenico di Carlo, who had been in charge since the start of the season, on March 11 with the team sitting in 17th place and having won only five times in 27 league matches.



Argentina football legend Diego Maradona (C) is in action during a charity match at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Monday.

Selection worry for Fergie

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson admits he faces one of the hardest decisions of his career as the Manchester United manager prepares for the Champions League final.

Ferguson expects to have his full 26-man squad fit for selection when United travel to Moscow next week for the showdown against Chelsea.

But the Scot can only name seven substitutes, which will force him to tell eight players they won't be involved in the biggest game of their lives.

"I think picking the team will be easier than picking the substitutes," Ferguson told Sky Sports News.

"I'm going to have to leave some fantastic players out of the squad completely next week, which I won't enjoy doing."

"It's got to be done and I don't know when I'm going to pick that moment."

"I'm going to have to speak to

them. It's not something I'm looking forward to. But, on the other hand, it's a fantastic position for us to be in, having 26 fit players."

United's strength in depth played a key role in their title success. While Arsenal struggled when they were hit by injuries, Ferguson's team were able to cope with any absences because another top-quality replacement was ready to step in.

Chelsea are one of the few teams in the world who can match United's quality throughout a big squad, but Ferguson is confident the Premier League champions will still have the edge as the Blues try to recover from their last-day misery.

"You need a really powerful squad to achieve on all fronts," Ferguson said. "I took 26 players to Wigan and every player was fit."

"They all came through the game, which means I'm travelling to Moscow with 26 fit players."

"That's unheard of in my time and that gives us an incredible chance."

"I think Chelsea know they'd rather be in our position than their own position."

"Having won the league, there

was a lot of joy about the place, whereas Chelsea have to pick themselves up after drawing against Bolton."

Even if United do return from the Russian capital with their third European Cup, Ferguson knows they still have a long way to go before claiming a place among the continent's most consistent winners of the competition.

Real Madrid have won the Cup nine times and AC Milan have seven victories, while arch rivals Liverpool can look back on five successful campaigns.

But United's young side may not be at their peak yet and Ferguson hopes that emerging talent can bring more European glory to Old Trafford in the future.

"That's the kind of record we should really have," he said. "That's one thing that should drive us all on now," he said. "We have an opportunity next Wednesday to help us along that way."

"There's a freshness about the place with young players coming in. They refresh you and enthruse you," he said. "It's wonderful to have that youth around."

Rivals fear Bayern power

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich's domination of the Bundesliga this season may have gone down well at the Allianz Arena, but their fourth domestic double in six years is causing alarm bells to ring in Germany.

Bayern wrapped up the German Cup and Bundesliga double at the start of the month to add to their 2003, 2005 and 2006 success, but their title rivals are concerned the bar has been set too high.

Without question, no other Bundesliga side can match the financial resources of Bayern.

The German giants splashed out 69 million euros (100 million US dollars) last summer to bring the likes of Italy's Luca Toni, French star Franck Ribery and German striker Miroslav Klose to Munich.

They effectively bought the German league title and secured their place in next season's Champions League, but their main rivals are wondering if they can match the Bavarian football barons.

"There's a great danger of Bayern winning the title three or four times in the next five years," said Bayer Leverkusen's director of sport Rudi Voeller.

believes the newly-crowned champions are "on a par with the biggest clubs of them all, the Real Madrids, AC Milan and Arsenal."

Only 2007 champions VfB Stuttgart and Energie Cottbus managed to beat Bayern in the league this season.

And Stuttgart coach Armin Veh says the gap between Bayern and the league's "also-rans" is growing too wide.

"A couple of clubs could have got at Bayern this season. I think it'll be more difficult in the years to come, because their team will become even more settled," said Veh.

Bayern have reportedly offered AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso a six million euros a year salary to boost their Champions League campaign next season while fellow World Cup winner Toni is already paid a 10 million euros annual salary.

"The Champions League is more important than anything else next season," admits Bayern manager Uli Hoeneß.

New coach Jurgen Klinsmann knows he has to make an impact in Europe next season when he starts on July 1.

Bayern led the Bundesliga from the opening weekend to the last, but some of their rivals have already laid down the gauntlet for next season.

"They've been clearly the best this season," said Schalke 04 manager Andreas Muller.

"But that doesn't mean Bayern will win the championship every year from now on."

"Clubs like Werder, Stuttgart and us are always in with a chance of matching them over the course