



Turkey striker Kazim Kazim (C) tries to outwit Slovakia's Radoslav Zabavnik (L) during their international friendly match in Bielefeld on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Flamini left to fulfil dream

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's latest signing Mathieu Flamini has spoken about his decision to leave Arsenal, saying that only a dream move to the Italian giants could have tempted him away from London.

The 24-year-old Frenchman on Monday signed a four-year deal on a free transfer to the Milan club, after successfully completing a medical.

"I always thought Milan would be my first choice if I had to leave Arsenal," he told La Gazzetta dello Sport on Wednesday.

"I didn't do it for money. I don't want to brag, but I had lots of offers. If I chose Milan it was because it is every player's dream."

The Frenchman -- who signed for the Gunners in 2004 -- had turned down a new deal offered by manager Arsene Wenger prior to his contract running out at the end of the season.

"It was not easy to make the decision to leave London, but I knew what I wanted," he added.

AC Milan failed to make the cut for next season's Champions League competition after finishing fifth in the Scudetto, and will now compete in the UEFA Cup.

## Spurs after Henry

INTERNET, undated

Tottenham boss Juande Ramos is switching his attentions from Samuel Eto'o to Barcelona teammate Thierry Henry, according to a local Spanish cabbie!

On Monday, Ramos reportedly reported yesterday claims from a taxi driver, known as 'Miguel', who took Ramos around Barcelona that he was discussing his transfer plans on his mobile phone during the journey.

During the trip, Ramos held two conversations via his mobile phone.

In the first, he said loudly: "Eto'o, impossible. Now we will go for Henry."

In the second, he expressed his intention to sign a central defender and a left winger, and noted the names of Dani Jarque, the Espanyol defender, and Valencia midfielder David Silva.

## Maradona warns Pele

AFP, Cannes

Argentina's Diego Maradona, notorious for his drug-taking, warned fellow soccer icon Pele Tuesday to stop criticising him because he too had a "dark side" and had done things he wants kept secret.

"He too has a dark side," Maradona said of Pele in Cannes after a press screening of a documentary on his life by Serbian director Emir Kusturica.

"I'm familiar with a lot of stories about him (Pele). I think he had better keep quiet," he told reporters.

Pele has said Maradona's medals should be stripped from him because of his drugs offences.

"His way of talking about me is undignified," Maradona said Tuesday.

## Turkey see off Slovakia

Football

AFP, Bielefeld

2002 World Cup semifinalists Turkey beat Slovakia 1-0 to give themselves a timely boost ahead of the Euro 2008 finals which begin on June 7.

A goal by defender Hakan Balta in the second-half was enough to see the Turks to victory but their performance satisfied veteran coach Fatih Terim, who said he had not had six first choice players available to him including star forward Nihat Kahveci.

Terim started with an experimental starting XI throwing in

fresh faces such as Mervut Erdinc, who plays for French side Sochaux, and it clearly showed in the first-half display in which they were not very well organised.

Defensively they had their nervous moments and had to thank one of their heroes from 2002 in goalkeeper Rustu Recber from saving them.

However, once Terim sent on another of the class of 2002 in Emre Belozoglu and two other less raw talents in right wing Sabri Sarioglu and striker Gokdeniz Karadeniz the Turks settled into more of a rhythm.

They finally breached the Slovakian defence in the 63rd

minute as Hakan shot home with a left foot shot.

The Slovaks -- who have not qualified for Euro 2008 -- only looked dangerous in the latter stages after Filip Holosko came on for captain Robert Wattick and caused their rivals defence a few problems.

Turkey's next warm-up match is against South American outfit AC Milan defender Massimo Oddo missed the cut through injury, while Borriello was preferred up front to AC Milan veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi.

At Euro they are in Group A along with co-hosts Switzerland, 2004 semifinalists Czech Republic and 2004 finalists Portugal, who they play in their first match on June 7 in Geneva.

## Del Piero, Cassano make it

AFP, Rome

Alessandro Del Piero made the cut on Tuesday as Italy coach Roberto Donadoni trimmed his Euro 2008 list of possibles down to 24 -- though he has to drop one name by May 28.

Veteran attacker Del Piero has been regularly overlooked by the world champions recently, but scored twice at the weekend for Juventus to give him a Serie A best goal tally for the season of 21.

Italy have six forwards in the 24 but Del Piero is easily the most experienced with his 85 caps, although Bayern Munich hitman Luca Toni is now days' top dog.

Marco Borriello of Genoa has won just two caps. Sampdoria's Antonio

Cassano just 10 and Udinese's Fabio Quagliarella only eight.

Antonio Di Natale of Udinese has won 17.

"There are no reserves," insisted Donadoni. "There are 24 players who will play for a place in the squad."

Once-capped Fiorentina midfielder Riccardo Montolivo seems the most likely to miss the final cut.

"I'm putting myself in the shoes of the player who will have to go home," said Donadoni. "It won't be nice for anyone. But everyone must be aware of being in the same conditions."

The squad is, however, brimming with experience offered by the 14 players who were part of Italy's World Cup-winning team in Germany in 2006, although the coach warned experience would count for nothing come June.

"In this team there are no guarantees for anyone," he said. "The sole

guarantee is the availability of the players."

Juventus striker Vincenzo Iaquinta and AC Milan defender Massimo Oddo missed the cut through injury, while Borriello was preferred up front to AC Milan veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi.

"For Pippo" (Inzaghi), age didn't come into it. It was a technical choice," Donadoni said, adding: "I'm disappointed for Oddo but his injury has been determined."

In a statement published on the Milan website, Inzaghi, who has scored 25 goals in 57 appearances for Italy, said: "I'm disappointed, above all a human level."

"At the start, there was a positive, frank and direct rapport with the coach," he said.

"I thought I'd demonstrated my loyalty, whether it be by travelling for games without playing, or by scoring (two goals) last year against the France Isles in a qualification game worth three points like all the others."

"Then, there's been silence, notwithstanding my performances with Milan on all continents and the 18 goals scored from winter to April-May."

The Italy squad meets up in the federal training centre in Florence on Sunday and will remain there until May 30, when they play their final warm-up game at the city's Artemio Franchi stadium against Belgium.

After a free weekend, they will then retrace in Milan to fly to their basecamp in Baden, Austria on June 2 ahead of the June 7-29 tournament co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland.

Italy are in Group C alongside Romania, France and the Netherlands. Their first game is against the Dutch in Bern on June 9.

### SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Marco Amelia (Livorno/6 caps), Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus/81), Morgan De Sanctis (Sevilla/ESP/2)

**Defenders:** Fabio Cannavaro (Real Madrid/ESP/115, capt), Andrea Barzagli (Palermo/21), Giorgio Chiellini (Juventus/9), Fabio Grosso (Lyon/FRA/30), Marco Materazzi (Inter Milan/40), Christian Panucci (AS Roma/52), Gianluca Zambrotta (Barcelona/ESP/70)

**Midfielders:** Massimo Ambrosini (AC Milan/30), Alberto Aquilani (AS Roma/4), Mauro Camoranesi (Juventus/34), Daniele De Rossi (AS Roma/33), Gennaro Gattuso (AC Milan/57), Riccardo Montolivo (Fiorentina/1), Simone Perrotta (AS Roma/40), Andrea Pirlo (AC Milan/45)

**Strikers:** Marco Borriello (Genoa/2), Antonio Cassano (Sampdoria/10), Antonio Di Natale (Udinese/17), Alessandro Del Piero (Juventus/85), Fabio Quagliarella (Udinese/8), Luca Toni (Bayern/GER/33)



Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona (C) poses with his daughters Dalma (L) and Giannina as he arrives to attend the screening of his documentary film at the 61st Cannes International Film Festival on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## C'Ron inherits Figo's mantle

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo assumed former great Luis Figo's role on Tuesday as he was handed his number 7 shirt and named captain by Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

The 23-year-old Manchester United winger -- scorer of 41 goals in all competitions this campaign -- will attempt to achieve something Figo never managed, guiding the Portuguese to a major senior title, having lost 1-0 to Greece in the Euro 2004 final.

Ronaldo also wears the number 7 shirt at United, which has been previously worn by George Best, Eric Cantona and David Beckham.

Ronaldo was chosen as captain over four players who previously captained the side -- Nuno Gomes, Petit, Simao and Ricardo Carvalho -- who are in the squad which is currently training in the town of Viseu in central Portugal.

Both Ronaldo and Carvalho are not with the squad as they are preparing to face each other in the Champions League final between United and Chelsea in Moscow on Wednesday.

Portugal are in Group A with co-hosts Switzerland, 2004 semifinalists Czech Republic and 2002 World Cup semifinalists Turkey.

## Greece name Euro squad

AFP, Athens

Greece coach Otto Rehhagel has named a 24-man squad for the Euro 2008 final in Hungary on Saturday in Budapest.

Rehhagel will cut one player from the squad for next month's Euro 2008 tournament.

### SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Antonis Nikopolidis (Olympiakos Piraeus), Alexandros Tzorvas (OFI Crete), Costas Halkias (Aris Salonica)

**Defenders:** Lukas Panathina and Ioannis Goumas (Panathinaikos Athens), Socrates Papastathopoulos (AEK Athens), Paraskevas Antzas, Christos Patsazoglou (Olympiakos), Vasilis Torosidis (Olympiakos), Georgios Seitaridis (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Sotiris Kyrgiakos (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER)

**Midfielders:** Costas Katsouranis (Benfica/POR), Alexandros Tziolis (Panathinaikos), Nikos Spyropoulos (Panathinaikos), Georgios Karagounis (Panathinaikos), Stelios Giannakopoulos (Bolton/Eng), Angelos Basinas (Real Mallorca/ESP), Ioannis Amanatidis (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER)

**Strikers:** Dimitris Salpingidis (Panathinaikos), Nikos Limberopoulos (AEK), Fanis Gekas (Bayer Leverkusen/GER), Angelos Haristeads (Nurnberg/GER), Georgios Samaras (Celtic/SCO)

## Pauleta wants talks on future

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain striker Pedro Pauleta said on Tuesday he would have liked a chance to discuss his future at the club and admitted that the failure of the club to enter talks as his contract ran out meant it was "difficult" to see him postponing his departure.

"You can never say never. But of course I would have liked it if they had asked me earlier what I wanted to do. I didn't say it's too late but today it's difficult," said the 35-year-old former Portuguese international striker, who is now set to retire after helping the club just stave off relegation.

He told TV Infosport: "One thing I would really have liked to have been asked: Pedro, what do you want to do at the end of the season?"

"But it's normal. We were in a difficult situation and the most important thing was Paris staying up."

"One thing is sure - Paris is my last club in France and abroad," he added.

Pauleta's swansong is set to be the French Cup final against champions Lyon on Saturday where they are bidding to add that to their League Cup success earlier this season.

## Barca step up Silva talks

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona sports chief Txiki Begiristain has stepped up negotiations with the representatives of Valencia midfielder David Silva.

Begiristain is keen to add quality width to Pep Guardiola's midfield next season and Silva is high on his agenda, says Diario Sport.

Silva's buyout clause is £12 million, though Barca are confident of talking down that figure with the Valencia desperate to balance the books during this summer's market.

## Benitez eyes MU scalp

AFP, Liverpool



While Manchester United were preparing for the Champions League final, Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez was already planning to overthrow the Premier League champions next season.

Benitez's side finished 11 points behind United but the Spaniard is convinced that gap can be overhauled if the Reds come out on top in the direct confrontations with their bitter rivals.

Liverpool already a woeful recent record against Sir Alex Ferguson's team, losing both meetings this term and winning only one of their last nine meetings. In Benitez's four seasons at Anfield, Liverpool have lost seven of their league clashes, with a 0-0 draw their only point in that time.

Ferguson made it his publicly stated aim to "knock Liverpool off their perch" when he arrived at the club in 1986. There can be no doubt he has achieved that goal and

Benitez knows it is essential to get the better of United if his team are to end their 18-year wait to win the title.

"If you beat Manchester United once it results in a six-point swing either way and that can be the difference," he told Liverpool's official magazine.

"Clearly, just one team can win the league, so it doesn't really matter if you are three, six, nine or 11 points behind as we are this season."

"It is not a massive difference. It may just come down to one game over the course of a season."

"The key for me is knowing there is a difference between us and the three teams above us and that we must now reduce this gap."

"It was not massive this season. We came closer than last season. Hopefully next season we will be closer again, maybe even on top of them."

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has already told Benitez he needs to spend big money in the close-season if the Reds are to become serious title challengers.

## Persie boost for Dutch

AFP, Noordwijk Aan Zee



Arsenal striker Robin van Persie boosted Dutch hopes of landing their second European title on Tuesday as he told AFP he believed he would be fully fit by the time Euro 2008 starts on June 7.

However, there are many who think that should he not convince coach Marco van Basten by May 28 of his fitness then he will be one of the three players who will be cut as there are presently 26 in the squad, and the limit is 23.

The 24-year-old was bedevilled with injuries during the Premiership campaign but insisted that he could get back to top form as The Netherlands attempt to add

to their 1988 predecessors -- which included van Basten -- won.

"After all the physical niggles I had this season it is not obvious that I am going to be at the top of my form," said van Persie after the Dutch had their first training session at their training camp here.

"I must take it gradually (getting back to full fitness) but I am optimistic, I think, that I will be ready for the beginning of the tournament," added van Persie, who trained apart from the rest of the squad with a physiotherapist.

Van Persie, scorer of seven goals in his 23 internationals, suffered from several different injuries during what was both a frustrating campaign for him and the club, as he went down with knee, thigh and ankle problems.

"It is both tiring physically as well as psychologically because

each time I thought I was getting back to being fully fit, I had a reverse," he said.

"The coach has confidence in me, which is very pleasing and reassuring," added van Persie, who is unlikely to be fit for the warm-up match with Ukraine on Saturday.

Van Basten, though, is confident van Persie will be lining up with the Dutch come the start of the tournament.

"I do not want to take a risk with Robin," said van Basten, who will step down after the tournament and take charge of Ajax.

"My wish is that he will be 100 per cent fit on June 9 (the Dutch begin their challenge against world champions Italy)."

The Dutch are in the Group of Death with not only Italy but World Cup finalists France and dark horses Romania.

## Croats ready to surprise

AFP, Zagreb



Eliminated in the first round of World Cup 2006, Croatia has turned its football fortunes around going into the European

Championships thanks to a new wave of players.

Some of them -- like Eduardo da Silva, Mladen Petric and Ivan Rakitic -- have been successfully drafted into the national squad after having been coached by senior team coach Slaven Bilic at youth level.

That approach has been credited with giving Croatia the tag of "dark horses" for the Euro 2008 championships, which kick off in Austria and Switzerland on June 7.

"Croatia is a hit!" said Ivica Osim, a former Japan coach who hails from neighbouring Bosnia.

"Slaven Bilic is doing a very good job, he has an excellently composed squad and Croatia are among the dark horses. They can certainly go very far," Osim told the newspaper Sportske Novosti.

Such optimism has stirred Euro 2008 fever in Croatia, where football fans are snapping up as many tickets as they can get their hands on ahead of the competition.

"Bilic made a logical choice of players" for the Euro 2008 finals, local football commentator

Tomislav Zidak said.

"He chooses those who led him to Europe. However, he continued to develop and has put forward some new names such as Nikola Kalinic, Manuel Pamic and Anas Sharbini," he added.

To make room for them, however, Bilic has had to give up an old guard that included Marko Babic, Bosko Balaban, and Jurica Vranjes.

"I have talked to them ... and these talks were not pleasant at all. They were disappointed, some even got angry, which is understandable," Bilic said.

Introduced into Croatia's senior squad as soon as Bilic took over after the 2006 World Cup failure, Arsenal striker Eduardo was ruled out of Euro 2008 as he is still recovering from a serious injury.

Eduardo, 25, suffered a compound fracture of his left leg in an horrific tackle by Birmingham defender Martin Taylor at St Andrews in February.

The absence of the Brazilian-born star, who has scored 13 goals in 18 matches for Croatia, was a great disappointment for Bilic.

Chosen in place of his main forward was Petric, who has been at German side Borussia Dortmund since August 2007.

The Bosnian-born Petric, 28, briefly played for the Croatian national team in 2001. He was again called up by Bilic in 2006 to play in Euro 2008 qualifying.

Known for his pace, he scored the third goal for Croatia's 3-2

victory against England at Wembley which eliminated their high-profile opponents from the Euro finals.

So far he has scored nine goals in 22 matches for Croatia.

Petric is not the only one in the Croatia squad from the "Swiss school," as there is also midfielder Rakitic, 20, and a talented sharpshooter currently at Bundesliga outfit Schalke 04.

Dynamo's captain, Luka Modric, who recently signed a five-year contract with Tottenham from next season, is considered the "brains" of the team.

He is so highly rated at home that not only is he considered the best player in the Croatian league, but also one of the best midfielders in Europe, by some local experts.

Another from the new wave of stars is 22-year-old Vedran Corlika, the Manchester City defender who moved to England in August 2007 from Dynamo Zagreb.

Corlika has 18 international caps and is one of the Croatia squad's most popular players among fans.

But despite the optimism about Croatia's chances of going far in the tournament, fans are furious with the football association after it only offered them 18 per cent of the total tickets they received.

These were put up for sale on the Internet, while the rest are to be handed out to sponsors, as well as former players and officials.



Czech Republic striker Milan Baros (C) controls the ball during the team's training session in Bad Kleinkirchheim, Austria on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP