

# FIFA bans Iraq

Football

REUTERS, Sydney

Iraq faces a year in the soccer wilderness after FIFA suspended it from all international competitions on Monday and issued an ultimatum to Baghdad.

The executive board of world soccer's governing body announced it had imposed the ban after the Iraq government dissolved its National Olympic Committee and national sport federations in breach of FIFA and Olympic regulations.

The board will recommend that the FIFA Congress, which meets in Sydney on Friday, suspends Iraq from all tournaments for 12 months, but left the door open for a reprieve if Baghdad reversed its decision by 1400 GMT on Thursday.

"The FIFA Executive Committee decided to suspend the Iraqi Football Association (IFA) as of today ... following the governmental decree passed on May 20 which dissolved the Iraqi National Olympic Committee and all national sport federations, including the IFA," FIFA said in a statement.

"The FIFA Executive Committee also decided ... the case of the Iraqi Football Association would be presented to the FIFA Congress on May 30 for suspension until the FIFA Congress in 2009, namely one year.

"However, the suspension decided upon today may be lifted if FIFA receives by May 29, midnight (Sydney time), written confirmation from the Iraqi government that the decree has been annulled."

The chances of an agreement being reached appeared slim when Iraq Sports Minister Jassem Mohammed Jaafar told Reuters on Sunday that the government would not back down on its decision, despite the threat of a ban.

Any suspension would destroy Iraq's dream of competing at the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

Iraq were due to play Australia in a qualifier in Brisbane on Sunday then again in Dubai next week and if they miss those matches, Australia would be given the points.

The Iraq team were in Thailand preparing to leave for Australia when FIFA announced the decision. Iraq coach Adnan Hamad told Reuters in Bangkok that the players were in a state of depression after learning of the ban.

"The decision is a big shock for the players. They are depressed," he said.

"Now we are awaiting for direction from the Iraqi Football Federation to know what to do. We are supposed to leave for Australia on May 27 but we will postpone that."

Australian officials said they were also hoping for a resolution so that Sunday's World Cup match would proceed.

Any cancellation would increase Australia's chances of making it through to the next stage of qualifying but the Football Federation of Australia (FFA) would lose about A\$3 million (\$2.88 million) in ticket sales and sponsorship.

"Our strong hope is the matter is resolved as quickly as possible and the two teams can meet on the field," the FFA's head of corporate and public affairs Bonita Mersiaides Mersiaides said.

"In the meantime the Soccerroos are continuing as if it's business as usual."

The Iraqi team provided their war-torn homeland with a rare moment of celebration in 2007 when they won the Asian Cup in one of sport's great modern fairytales.

Few people had given Iraq any chance of winning the tournament after a haphazard preparation brought about by the war at home and a hastily-assembled team that included Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish players.

But they defied seemingly impossible odds to reach the final in Jakarta where they beat Saudi Arabia 1-0 and Hamad said it was crucial for the people of Iraq that the team were able to play.

"They believe this team is the only thing that can bring the country together," Hamad said. "Football success is the only thing that makes them happy."

## Cassano is no 'alien'

REUTERS, Florence

Temperamental striker Antonio Cassano should not be treated like he is from another planet, Italy coach Roberto Donadoni said on Sunday.

Eyebrows were raised last week when the 25-year-old was surprisingly named in Donadoni's provisional Euro 2008 squad, having not been called up since 2006.

The Sampdoria forward, on loan from Real Madrid, has had a superb season but also served a five-match ban for verbally abusing a referee and throwing his shirt towards him.

"Antonio Cassano is just a lad, don't make him into an alien," the coach told a news conference on the first day of Italy training ahead of Friday's final friendly with Belgium.

"I believe after that heavy suspension in the league he has understood what it means to be in a group."

Teammates including full back Gianluca Zambrotta have also backed the talented frontman.

"I am not surprised to see Cassano with the national team," Zambrotta said. "He's had a good season and I don't believe he needs particular advice. We are not talking about a 16-year-old boy."

Cassano's inclusion in the 24-man squad, which must be trimmed by one before Wednesday's deadline, ahead of the June tournament in Austria and Switzerland, meant there was no place for AC Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi.

The 34-year-old Inzaghi criticised Donadoni for not calling him originally to say he had been left out, but the coach was unrepentant.

"I respect him but he must respect me. I have nothing to be sorry for. What we said to each other stays between us and the issue is closed," Donadoni said.

The world champions face the Netherlands, Romania and France in Group C.

## Turkey tune up poorly

AFP, Bochum

Turkey lost a Euro 2008 warm-up friendly 3-2 to Uruguay here on Sunday as Fatih Terim's Turks suffered a setback.

Terim rang the changes, fielding only four of the starters who beat Slovakia 1-0 last Tuesday in another German friendly, to see what his squad have in reserve.

Defender Servet Cetin was out injured, as was midfielder Mehmet Aurelio and their absence was keenly felt. Arda Turan opened the scoring with an early header from a cross by Hamit Altintop.

But Uruguay fought back and levelled from the spot on the half hour through Luis Suarez after he was upended by keeper Volkan Demirel.

A fine freekick from Nihat Kahveci six minutes after the restart put the Turks back in front but goals from Suarez on 78 minutes, profiting from defensive disarray, and then a Cristian Rodriguez spotkick five minutes from the end after Emre Asik fouled him, completed a Uruguayan turnaround.

On Thursday the Turks will take on Finland in the German town of Duisburg.

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

## Zaragoza keep Oliveira

REUTERS, Madrid

Relegated Real Zaragoza have exercised an option to buy on-loan Brazilian striker Ricardo Oliveira from AC Milan, the Spanish second division club said on their Web site (www.realzaragoza.com).

The 27-year-old, who has agreed to a four-year contract, top scored for the club in the Primera Liga last season with 17 goals, despite them finishing 18th on the final day of the campaign to go down.

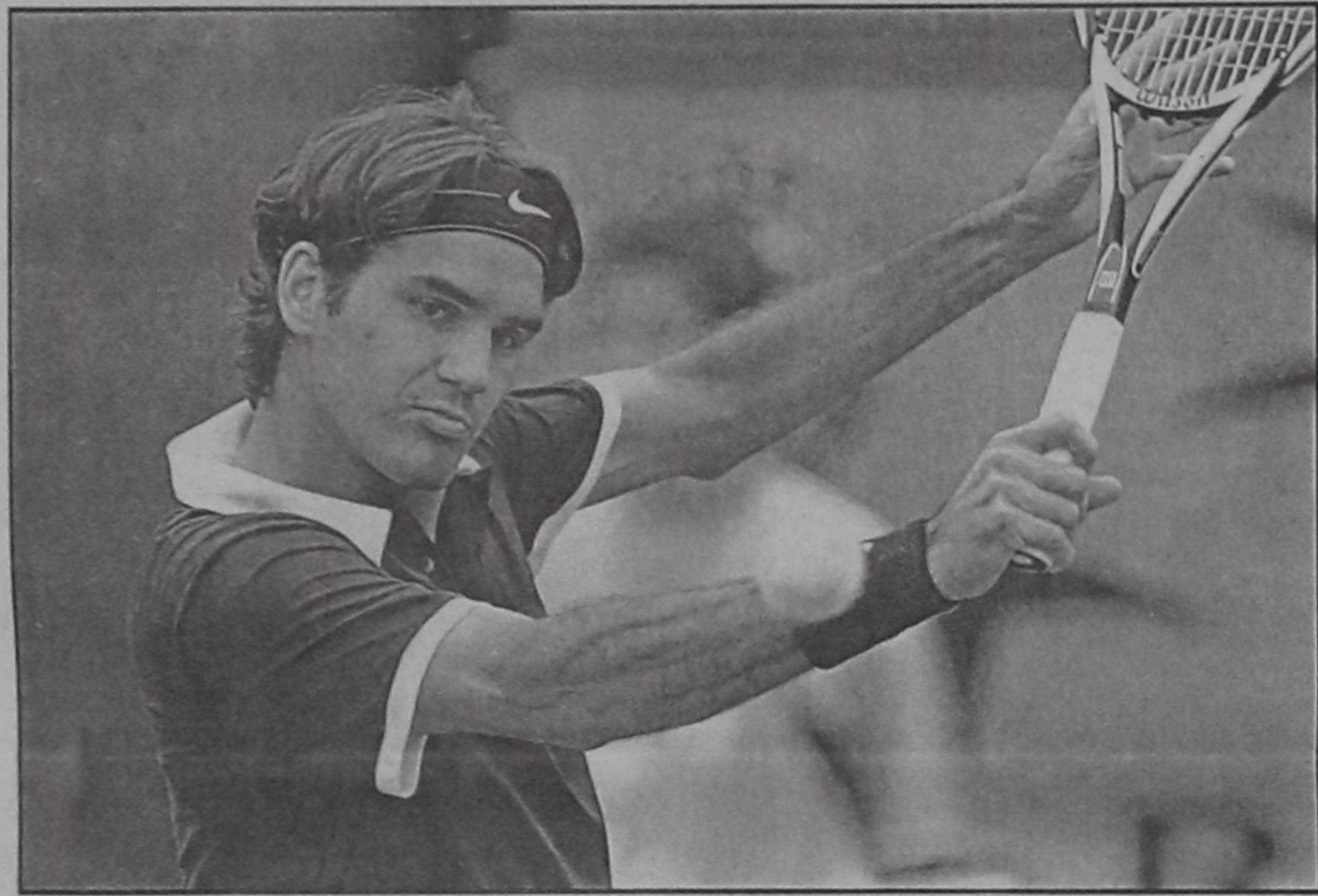
Spanish media reported the deal cost Zaragoza 10 million euros (\$15.8 million) and that their plan could be to look for a quick return on their money by selling him or loaning him out to a top-flight club with Atletico Madrid and Villarreal possible destinations.

Milan paid Zaragoza's Spanish rivals Real Betis 17 million euros for Oliveira in 2006.

He had scored 22 goals in La Liga in the 2004-05 season and was billed as the replacement for Andriy Shevchenko at Milan, but failed to make an impression scoring just three goals in 26 Serie A appearances. He was loaned to Zaragoza in 2007.



Italy midfielder Gennaro Gattuso (L) looks on as striker Antonio Di Natale (C) and defender Gianluca Zambrotta fight for possession of the ball during a training session of the Italian national team ahead of next month's Euro 2008 at the National Technical Center of Coverciano near Florence on Monday. Italy have been drawn in Group C along with France, the Netherlands and Romania for the first round of the European competition which takes place from June 7 to 29 in Austria and Switzerland.



World number one Roger Federer makes a backhand return to his US opponent Sam Querrey during their French Open first round match at Roland Garros on Monday.

# Double boost for Federer

French Open

AFP, Paris

Roger Federer's 10th French Open campaign enjoyed a double boost on Monday when he negotiated his way past American Sam Querrey and then saw possible quarterfinal opponent Richard Gasquet pull out injured.

Top seed and world number one Federer, still missing a Roland Garros title from his collection of 12 Grand Slam trophies, saw off world number 40 Querrey 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 in his first round match.

He will now face either Spain's Albert Montanes or close friend Kristof Vliegen of Belgium for a third round spot.

"This was a potentially dangerous match so I'm happy to get through," said Federer whose run-up to Roland Garros featured defeats against defending French Open champion Rafael Nadal in the Monte Carlo and Hamburg finals.

"I've played well all clay court season long. Now it's just a matter of getting used to the conditions. Practice is one thing, but getting through the matches is the another."

French eighth seed Gasquet, who was set to meet the Swiss in the quarterfinals, handed Federer a further boost by withdrawing from the tournament because of a left knee injury.

It was another blow to home hopes, 25 years after Yannick Noah

delivered the country's last men's title, following Australian Open runner-up Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's withdrawal at the weekend because of a knee injury.

Federer's win threw the spotlight back onto triple champion Nadal who later Monday begins his campaign to emulate Bjorn Borg by winning four successive French Opens when he tackles Brazilian qualifier Thomaz Bellucci.

The second seeded Spaniard comes into Roland Garros boasting a perfect record of 21 wins in 21 matches here and an intimidating run of 108 wins in 110 claycourt outings since April 2005.

He has also defeated Federer in the last two finals.

Serbian third seed Jelena Jankovic, who reached the semi-finals last year, enjoyed a 7-6 (7/3), 6-2 victory over Romanian lucky loser Monica Niculescu.

The 23-year-old will next meet either Italy's Tathiana Garbin or New Zealander Marina Erakovic as she plans to make the most of the shock retirement of Justine Henin, the winner here for the last three years.

"I don't see myself as the favourite," said Jankovic. "I am the number three in the world. There are others who are favourites but I feel I have made improvements."

"I am more mature. I have played in three Grand Slam semi-finals and lost to the eventual winner. Justine was the one against whom I always had the most trouble, so I have a better chance now."

American eighth seed Venus

Williams, runner-up to sister Serena in 2002, kicked off her 12th consecutive Roland Garros with a hard-fought 6-3, 4-6, 6-2 win over Israel's Tzipora Obziler, at 35 the oldest player in the draw.

Williams, who spent almost two hours disposing of the Israeli in testing damp conditions, now faces Tunisia's Selima Sfar for a place in the last 32.

"It was nice to have a challenge. She played really well and was very determined. I'm just happy to have figured it out," said Williams.

Cypriot Marcos Baghdatis, the 17th seed who spent his formative years in Paris, was knocked out 6-2, 6-4, 6-2 by Italy's Simone Bolelli who goes on to face Juan Martin del Potro, one of 19 Argentines who made the main draw.

"He has played more tournaments than I have recently, he hit the ball well and deserved to win," said Baghdatis who was playing his first claycourt event of the season.

Guillermo Coria, the 2004 runner-up who is slowly trying to rebuild his career after a year on the sidelines because of a shoulder injury, gave Spanish 12th seed Tommy Robredo a scare when he took the first set.

But Robredo, three times a quarter-finalist, eventually wrapped up a 5-7, 6-4, 6-1, 6-4 win and will next face either Serbia's Victor Troiki or Marc Gicquel of France.

Coria's fellow Argentine Guillermo Canas, the 29th seed, was also beaten losing 7-6 (8/6), 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (10/8) to American wildcard Wayne Odesnik.

## EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Paris

Briefs for the Euro 2008 finals co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland between June 7-29 on Monday: A LITTLE 'LIGHT' READING HELPS DOMENECH TO KILL TIME

France coach Raymond Domenech has divulged how he will be killing time at Euro 2008 - by packing a seven-volume historical novel - Les Rois Maudits (the Cursed Kings) - in his suitcase. William Gallas on the other hand likes DVDs, ("especially American series") and books about slavery. The Arsenal captain explains:

"Lilian Thuram often talks to us about this subject and for the majority of us on the squad we don't know much about the past and want to learn a little more."

ARAGONES LINKED TO MEXICO CLUB POST

Spain's seasoned coach Luis Aragones, who retires from national service after Euro 2008, could be off to Mexico if reports in the Spanish media prove accurate. The straight talking 70-year-old has kept his own counsel on what the future holds after the finals but according to sports daily As he is due to be offered the manager's job at struggling Mexican side America.

AFTER MOSCOW DISAPPOINTMENT, BALLACK REJOINS GERMANY

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack will put the pain of missing out to Manchester United in the Champions League final behind him when he joins Germany on a pre-Euro 2008 training camp on Monday. The Mannschaft's captain was granted four days rest with his family to recover from the Moscow match. Germany's 25-strong squad have just returned from a week long stay in Mallorca for this week's training camp in Kaiserslautern. They play Belarus in a warm-up friendly on Tuesday.

# Ribery the new talisman

REUTERS, Paris



France's talismanic player.

Ribery burst into the limelight at the 2006 World Cup and has been improving ever since, turning on some dazzling performances during his first season at Bayern Munich as he helped them to the Bundesliga title.

Though now at home on the big stage, the 25-year-old took his time to making it to the top.

Kicked out of Lille's soccer academy at 16 because of a lack of application, he played for

unglamorous sides in lower divisions before making his top-flight debut for Metz in 2004.

After spells at Galatasaray and Olympique Marseille, he moved to Bayern last year and soon became the crowd favourite, as he had done everywhere else.

The explosive midfielder had not started a game for France before the 2006 World Cup but soon become an automatic choice for coach Raymond Domenech.

Zidane was full of praise for Ribery at the finals and advised him to conserve some of his energy instead of always darting off like a doglet off the leash.

A tireless runner with superb dribbling skills, Ribery is equally at ease on the wing or in a playmaking role.

Clearly recognisable by a long scar running across his forehead

and down his right cheek that he sustained in a car accident when he was two, Ribery has converted to Islam, the religion of his wife, Wahiba.

Born in the depressed northern fishing-port of Boulogne-sur-Mer, as was former France striker Jean-Pierre Papin, Ribery is nothing like Zidane off the pitch.

While the balding maestro who retired after his infamous head-butt on Italy's Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final is discreet, almost shy, Ribery is outspoken and humorous.

"The most important thing is to have lots of fun," Ribery once said.

"I'm young, I've got a great job and I'm enjoying myself. I don't see what I could complain about or why I should put myself under any kind of pressure."

# Franck voted Bundesliga's best

REUTERS, Berlin

France midfielder Franck Ribery was voted Bundesliga player of the year in a poll of 268 league players published in Kicker newspaper on Monday.

Ribery won 57.8 percent of the vote, well ahead of his Bayern Munich team mate Luca Toni of Italy, the league's leading scorer, who came in second place with 24.8 percent.

Werder Bremen's Brazilian midfielder Diego was third with 8.5 percent.

Ribery, 25, moved to Bayern from Olympique Marseille last year and instantly made an impact, helping the club dominate the Bundesliga en route to their 21st German championship. Bayern also won the German Cup this season.

Bayer Leverkusen's Rene Adler was voted the top goalkeeper, winning 40.7 percent of the vote. Hanover 96's Robert Enke was second with 21.1 percent and Bayern Munich's Oliver Kahn came in third with 11.6 percent.

Bayern's Ottmar Hitzfeld was voted coach of the year, with 32.9 percent in his final season in Munich.

Energie Cottbus coach Bojan Prasnigar, who helped the club with the small budget avoid relegation, was second with 18.9 percent. VfL Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath was third with 16.7 percent.

# Rafa making no promises

AFP, Liverpool

Rafa Benitez admits he cannot guarantee Liverpool will challenge for the Premier League title next season.

Benitez's side finished 11 points behind champions Manchester United and never threatened to mount a serious bid for the English crown.

After 18 years without title success, the pressure is on Benitez to end that drought in 2008-09. But the Spanish coach has delivered a downbeat appraisal of his chances in the forthcoming campaign that will hardly inspire players or fans at Anfield.

Benitez knows Chelsea are certain to hand a huge transfer war chest to Avram Grant's replacement, while United and Arsenal will be formidable opponents once again.

"It's more difficult than in Spain because the top sides spend big, big money. We will try to do our best and the key for me is to not talk about the title," he told Liverpoolfc.tv.

"The key is to be near the top, to be contenders. If we stay close then I think we are capable of doing it."

"It's more difficult because after two years of Chelsea winning the league and spending big money, United needed to do the same."

"They started spending big money and Arsenal were also spending big money on young players. We are trying to do the same but because they (Man Utd, Chelsea and Arsenal) are continuing to spend big money, it makes it more difficult to catch up."

"You also see Aston Villa, Newcastle, West Ham and Everton spending money and having strong teams. It's not easy to be in the top four and to be contenders but because we have a young squad we can try again."

# Akinfeyev's second coming

REUTERS, Moscow



Russia goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev

has a personal score to settle at Euro 2008 after the bitter memory of missing out four years ago on becoming the youngest player in the tournament.

At 18 years and two months, Akinfeyev was youngest player at Euro 2004 in Portugal and hoped to break Belgian Enzo Scifo's 20-year-old record as the youngest ever to play in a European Championship final.

Scifo made his Euro debut at 18 years three months and 25 days during the 1984 tournament in France.

Instead, Akinfeyev had to watch agonisingly from the bench as Russia lost their first two games against Spain and hosts Portugal and became the first team to be eliminated.

"Although I came to Portugal as Russia's third-choice keeper I was hoping to get a chance to play," the CSKA Moscow captain told Reuters

in an interview on the eve of his team's departure for their Euro 2008 training camp in Germany on Sunday.

"After we lost our first two matches and were already eliminated, there was some talk on the team that I would get a chance to play in our last group game against Greece."

Having already broken most of Russia's goalkeeping records, he wanted to make history on an international stage as well.

"Of course, I wanted to play but the coach (Georgy Yartsev) decided otherwise so there was nothing I could do other than sit on the bench and watch," recalled Akinfeyev, who made his Russian premier league debut in May 2003, soon after turning 17 and saved a penalty to keep a clean sheet in his first match.

"At 18 I was too young to think about it," said the Moscow native, who made his international debut in a friendly against Norway in April 2004, becoming the youngest goalkeeper ever to play for the national team, including the former Soviet Union.

"Only years later when you look back you realise the importance of

it. I could have made football history then."

"But there's no point in dwelling on it now because the more you think about it, the bigger the disappointment gets. So I prefer to look ahead to Euro 2008," he added.

"We have a good young team and if we play to our abilities we have a chance to surprise a few people."

Soon after Euro 2004, Akinfeyev became Russia's undisputed number one, although a serious knee injury sidelined him for most of last year.

When he came back at the start of the 2008 season he had to win his place back on the national team from Vladimir Gabulov and Vyacheslav Malafayev, who showed great form by leading Zenit St Petersburg to the UEFA Cup.

"(Russia coach) Guus Hiddink has yet to name his number one keeper, so I expect a tough battle from both Gabulov and Malafayev," said Akinfeyev, now at 22 considered one of the veterans on the national team.

"One thing you know for sure, unlike some previous coaches, with Guus there are no favourites and only the best will play."

# Guus rules out Chelsea job

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea received a double blow in their search for a successor to Avram Grant on Monday as Inter Milan manager Roberto Mancini and Russia coach Guus Hiddink both denied they want the Stamford Bridge job.

Mancini, who has just led Inter to a third successive Serie A title, has been heavily linked with the Premier League club for several months and that speculation increased after Grant's sacking on Saturday.

But the Italian's agent insisted he has had no contact with Chelsea and would not be instigating talks because Mancini wants to stay at the San Siro.

"There is no truth whatsoever that there has been contact with Chelsea and there has been no

contact with any team other than Inter," Maurizio De Giorgis told Sky Sports News.

"That is the real truth. If there are rumours they are unfounded. If there is anybody that went to make noises to Chelsea, it was not authorised by Roberto Mancini."

"He has a four-year contract with Inter and he is very happy to stay there."

"He just won a third championship and they are also going to try to win a fourth and the Champions League too."

Hiddink also appears keen to distance himself from the Stamford Bridge hotseat.

His stock soared after leading Russia to Euro 2008 at England's expense and his reported friendship with Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich added fuel to claims he would move to west London.

But Hiddink's agent Cees van Nieuwenhuizen insisted his client plans to stay with Russia until after

the 2010 World Cup.

"There's no way Guus will go to Chelsea," he told The Times.

"It's not an option and has never been. Guus is the coach of Russia and will stay until the World Cup of 2010."

Aside from Hiddink and Mancini other names in the frame to succeed Grant include Barcelona's Frank Rijkaard and Manchester City coach, and former England boss, Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Grant became the ninth Premier League manager of the season to be sacked, that sequence starting when Chelsea and Jose Mourinho parted company last September.

Despite the constant speculation over his position Grant, a close friend of Abramovich, had been credited with leading the club to their first ever Champions League final and pushing United to the wire in the race for the league title.