

Zidane refutes Aussie trip

AFP, Noumea

Three-time world footballer of the year Zinedine Zidane on Friday denied that he had ever agreed to travel to Australia for an exhibition match.

Organisers had claimed that Zidane was due to lead a team featuring his French 1998 World Cup-winning teammates, including Marcel Desailly and Robert Pires, against an Australian All-Stars team on Sunday.

But the 35-year-old football star pulled out of his Australian visit on Thursday, citing personal reasons, a spokeswoman for the event said.

"Zinedine Zidane regrettably has had to cancel his upcoming Australian tour due to personal reasons, with a view of rescheduling at a later date," event managers Octagon Sports Marketing said in a statement.

An Octagon spokeswoman said she believed many people would have sought refunds if the match had gone ahead without Zidane.

"It would be like going to see L.A. Galaxy without (David) Beckham," she said.

Former France captain Zidane insisted however that he had never "definitively agreed" that he would participate.

Zidane arrived with other members of France's 1998 squad in the French territory of New Caledonia on Wednesday, where they were expected to play in an exhibition on Saturday.

In a statement Zidane said that his "agreement (to compete in Sydney) was subject to contractual commitments which the organisers did not respect".

And the France star warned that he was considering taking legal action "to prevent the abusive use of his name in the future by unscrupulous promoters to create media hype".

Zidane retired in 2006 after a long and distinguished international career with France and at the club level with Real Madrid and Juventus.

Cassano seals move to Sampdoria

REUTERS, Madrid

Italy striker Antonio Cassano has moved from Real Madrid to Sampdoria on a permanent basis after a successful loan deal with the Serie A club, the Primera Liga side said on Friday.

Real did not disclose any further details, but Spanish media said the temperamental 25-year-old had been given a free transfer.

Cassano joined Real on a 4-1/2-year deal from AS Roma for 5.5 million euros in January 2006, but never settled at the Bernabeu and had several run-ins with then coach Fabio Capello during the following season.

He made it clear he did not want to remain at Real and went on loan to Sampdoria in August last year.

He had a superb campaign with the Serie A club but also hit the headlines for being given a five-match ban for verbally abusing a referee and throwing his shirt at him.

Eyebrows were raised last week when Roberto Donadoni named him in the Italy squad for Euro 2008, having not been called up since 2006.

Turkey impress in warm-up win

AFP, Duisburg

The 2002 World Cup semifinalists Turkey put in their most impressive performance of their warm-up matches for Euro 2008 here on Thursday as they eased to a 2-0 win over Finland.

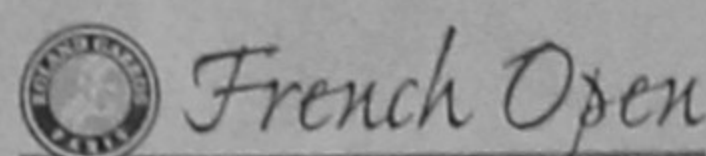
Goals by Middlesbrough's Tuncay Sanli and Semih Senturk, leading scorer in the Turkish championship last season, gave Turkey a deserved win and will have done them no harm of good ahead of their opening Euro 2008 Group A match against 2004 finalists Portugal.

While Tuncay and Semih got the goals it was the young Turk Mehmet Erdinc that caused interminable problems for the Finnish defence, as the striker, who plays for French First Division side Sochaux, twisted and turned them everywhere.

Equally encouraging for fiery coach Fatih Terim was that his defence re-enforced by Servet Cetin and Mehmet Aurelio showed much more resolve than in their previous two matches which saw them beat Slovakia 1-0 and then lose 3-2 to Uruguay.

Tuncay opened the scoring in the 15th minute, after good work by Sabri Sarioglu and Semih added a second two minutes from time after seizing on a ball from Kazim.

Serena knocked out



AFP, Paris

French Open drawcards Rafael Nadal and Maria Sharapova survived French Open scares on Friday but 2002 women's champion Serena Williams was knocked out in her worst performance in Paris since 1999.

Nadal, bidding to emulate Bjorn Borg as the only man to win four successive Roland Garros titles, needed treatment on his blistered right foot before brushing aside Finland's Jarkko Nieminen 6-1, 6-3, 6-1 to make the last 16.

Sharapova, the top women's seed who is seeking a French Open to complete a career Grand Slam, dropped a set for the second match in a row before seeing off colourful American Bethanie Mattek 6-2, 3-6, 6-2 to reach the third round.

But Williams' eighth Roland Garros appearance came to a disappointing third round end losing 6-4, 6-4 to Slovenia's Katarina Srebotnik to suffer her earliest Roland Garros exit since playing as a 17-year-old in 1999.

World number two Nadal, who has now won all of his 24 matches here, had to play Tuesday and Wednesday to see off Thomaz Bellucci as torrential rain earlier in the week played havoc with the schedule.

He was then back on court on Thursday to see off French qualifier Nicolas Devilder.

After cruising through the first two sets against fellow left-hander

Nieminen, he required a lengthy medical time-out to have his blistered right foot treated and dressed.

Despite the injury, Nadal still cruised to victory in under two hours on the back of two breaks of serve in the third set against Nieminen, the man who brought Andre Agassi's Roland Garros career to an end in 2005.

He will now face either fellow Spaniard Fernando Verdasco or Russian 15th seed Mikhail Youzhny for a place in the quarter-finals.

Sharapova had led her second round match with Mattek by a set, but a break down 2-3, when it was called off for the night on Thursday.

The American then levelled before Sharapova overpowered her opponent with her battery of groundstrokes and will now face Italian Karin Knapp for a place in the last 16.

"It's been a strange tournament so far, from the first round, playing in very difficult conditions to a long wait yesterday," said the world number one.

"Then today I wake up and you feel like you're playing a different match in a another tournament. It's been kind of strange, but the good thing is I still have a match ahead of me."

Williams looked out of sorts from the start quickly falling a service break down as the 27-year-old Srebotnik, who had lost her three previous meetings against the American, cleverly mixed her shot-making.

It was a similar story in the second set as Williams, the 2002 champion when she beat sister Venus in the

final, hung on grimly only to drop her serve again fatally in the ninth game.

Srebotnik let two match points slip by at 40-15, but clinched it on the next one as Williams hit a looping forehand wide.

It was the biggest win of Dubai-based Srebotnik's career taking her into the last 16 at Roland Garros for only the second time in 10 attempts.

The 27th seed will play the winner of the match between Emilie Loit of France and Patty Schnyder of Switzerland for a place in the quarter-finals.

"It helped a lot that I already played her two or three months ago in Charleston. I learned a lot from that match," she said.

"I played tactically well. I dug deep and played well on the big points. With the nerves and everything I did really well today."

Williams said she was at pains to explain how she had failed to fathom out how to get on top of her opponent.

"I just felt like I missed a lot of easy shots and a lot of key points that I felt could have turned the match around. I wasn't able to capitalize on that," she said.

Sister Venus, the eighth seed, was scheduled to play the last match on the Philippe Chatrier Centre Court against Italian claycourter Flavia Pennetta who beat her in Bangkok last year the last time they played.

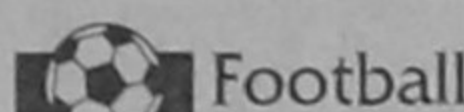
Second seed Ana Ivanovic, who lost last year's final to Justine Henin, looked comfortable, after a sluggish start, in despatching rising Danish player Caroline Wozniacki 6-4, 6-1.

Ivanovic will face Petra Cetkovska for a place in the quarter-finals.



Serbian star Ana Ivanovic pumps her fist after winning a point against Danish player Caroline Wozniacki during their French Open third round match at Roland Garros in Paris yesterday.

Mancini gets the sack



AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini must be wondering what the football world is coming to following his sacking after three consecutive Italian league titles (2006 to 2008) and two Italian Cups (2004 and 2005) in four years.

Portugal's former Porto and Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho is set to take over the Inter hotseat meanwhile.

The 43-year-old Mancini, who is the frontrunner for the vacant Chelsea job, was the most successful Inter Milan manager since the legendary Helenio Herrera in the 1960's and got rid of his mantle as constant "losers" since before Mancini they had not won since 1989.

However Mancini was unable to make Inter into viable Champions League contenders despite the three Serie A titles, of which only the last one was really won on merit.

The first one came in the wake of the match-fixing scandal and the second was brought about after the heavy points deductions or demotion of their main rivals. Mancini's record just was not good enough for club President Massimo Moratti.

It was the Champions league which the Nerazzurri president had

his eye on at any cost, a trophy the club have not won since consecutive European Cup wins in 1964 and 1965.

Though Mancini had supporters amongst the players, he was not considered the man to take the club into the future, mainly because the last two seasons he was only able to



ROBERTO MANCINI

take the club to the last 16 of the Champions League.

The previous two seasons, in 2005 and 2006, he did a little better, taking Inter a round further into the quarterfinals on both occasions.

Defeat to Liverpool had been felt bitterly at the club this season and Mancini had announced his departure at the end of the season minutes

after the end of the second leg.

Though Mancini denied it the following day, saying that he had spoken in the disappointment of the moment, the club did not hesitate to recall the situation in their statement on Thursday.

Perhaps Mancini can console himself with the consolation of 24 million euros in compensation thanks to the length of his contract which linked him to them till 2012.

The man-of-the-moment is considered by Moratti to be Mourinho -- or "The Special One" as he has been dubbed -- and according to the Italian press, he should be installed officially as coach in the next few days.

The big advantage of Mourinho is his track record with major clubs, winning the 2004 Champions League with Porto and taking Chelsea to two Premiership titles.

Midfielder Frank Lampard, Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba or defender Ricardo Carvalho of Portugal, all Chelsea players close to their former coach, have been touted as possibly making the move to the San Siro to join up with their old boss.

The other transfer operation concerning Inter could see their Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic moving to Barcelona in a swap deal with Barca's Cameroonian front man Samuel Eto'o.

Real won't get C'Ron

AFP, London

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has admitted his club's bid to sign Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo is destined to end in failure.

Real have been desperate to sign Ronaldo despite United's refusal to listen to offers for the Portuguese star.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson accused Real of having "no morals" and the Premier League champions even threatened to report Real to FIFA earlier this week after Madrid coach Bernd Schuster claimed Ronaldo would fit perfectly at the Bernabeu.

Now Calderon appears to have called off the chase as he conceded he could not force United to sell their prize asset.

"You can't buy what the owner does not want to sell," Calderon told Sky Sports News. "Real Madrid are friends with Manchester United and we do not want to fall out with them."

Real Madrid have in recent seasons found United more willing to sell, as they secured David Beckham and then Ruud van Nistelrooy, both of whom contributed to title wins.

Kranjcar wants to surpass hero

AFP, Portsmouth

Niko Kranjcar was a star-eyed 13-year-old schoolboy when Robert Prosinecki inspired Croatia to finish third at the 1998 World Cup and now the Portsmouth midfielder aims to surpass his hero by leading Slaven Bilic's side to their first major honour.

Croatia have been considered Europe's perennial "dark horses" ever since Prosinecki and friends guided the tiny Balkan country to the semi-finals in France.

The 23-year-old believes Bilic's emerging team can cap Croatia's amazing rise by winning Euro 2008, despite only playing their first competitive match 14 years ago.

The elegant playmaker, whose side have already ended England's hopes of glory in Austria and Switzerland, said: "I am excited and looking forward to the tournament because it is one of the major international trophies in the world."

"We as a team are always improving and have a great chance of going all the way. We showed against England in the qualifiers how good we can be and we aim to show that again in the finals."

"A lot of things have to happen and there is always an element of luck involved but we have the players and the ability to make history."

Croatia will have to see off the challenge of favourites Germany, France, Spain and Italy to lift the trophy but their hopes of going all the way to the June 29 final have been dented by the absence of stricken Arsenal striker Eduardo following his horror leg break.

Kranjcar is aware of the hole left in the squad by Eduardo's absence but believes Bilic's outfit are still strong enough to compensate for the loss of his teenage friend.

Croatia face weak co-hosts Austria in their campaign opener and Kranjcar believes a win can help create the momentum to ensure they return to Vienna's Ernst Happel Stadium for the final.

Expectation burdens Italy

AFP, Rome



Coming into the tournament as the reigning world champions and on the back of topping a qualifying group that included France and Ukraine, it

would seem on the face of it that Italy will be the team to beat in Austria and Switzerland.

They also recorded an impressive 3-1 friendly victory over one of the other favourites Portugal recently.

Italian teams may not have excelled in Europe this season but given that few top European teams are actually predominantly represented by players from the same country that is not much of an indicator.

Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro has lifted the league title with Real Madrid for the second year in a row and another export, main striker Luca Toni is champion and top scorer in Germany.

Football in the country looks remarkably healthy and the fans are brimming with confidence, but that could just be Italy's downfall.

In recent times Italy have almost always flattered to deceive when among the favourites and yet risen to the occasion when expectations were at their lowest.

Two years ago Italy were in disarray ahead of the World Cup finals in Germany. The match-

fixing scandal had erupted and there were also suspicions of illegal betting by notable players, such as goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

Everyone knows what happened next. Italy trudged along unspectacularly but made it all the way to the final and beat France on penalties to claim their fourth world crown.

It was a similar situation to 1982 when Paolo Rossi had received a suspension for another betting scandal and came back just before the World Cup to then inspire Italy to victory in Spain.

In 1994 Italy were supposed to be a waning team but they gritted their teeth and battled through to the final where they lost to Brazil on penalties.

However there have also been many false dawns in Italian football, particularly in the European Championships.

In the 1986 World Cup the reigning champions were eliminated in the second round by France, in 1990 they failed to win on home soil and in 1992 they did not even make it to the European Championship finals.

At Euro 96 Italy were expected to do well in England and faced a group with Germany, Russia and the Czech Republic.

They began well in defeating Russia but then suffered a surprise loss to the Czechs, who until then were not considered one of the top sides.

Italy battered eventual champions Germany in their last match but could not score in a 0-0 draw

and went out in the group stages.

In 2000 they reached the final but in 2004 they failed to get out of a comfortable looking group including Sweden, Denmark and Bulgaria.

There was also the 2002 World Cup defeat to co-hosts South Korea to add to the list of Italian disasters in big tournaments.

It all means that a measure of caution should surround the Italians ahead of the June finals, particularly given their being drawn in the group of death with France, The Netherlands and Romania.

World Cup winning coach Marcello Lippi also seemingly tempted fate recently when he declared: "Right now there is no better team in Europe than Italy."

"There is enthusiasm, there's a good feeling. And the joy shown after qualification against Scotland (Italy won in Glasgow to secure their place at the finals) says more than any discussion."

If history is to be taken into consideration then Italy will probably be taking an early flight home unless that expectation is tempered a little.

Perhaps their only saving grace is the uncertainty surrounding the future of coach Roberto Donadoni, who was offered a conditional contract extension based on progression to at least the semifinals.

He turned it down and maybe that unknown factor will have created just enough doubt to bring the best out of Italy.

Chelsea remove Ten Cate

AFP, London

Chelsea assistant manager Henk Ten Cate was sacked on Thursday as the Dutchman became the latest victim of the Premier League club's close-season clear-out.

Ten Cate arrived at Stamford Bridge in October to work alongside manager Avram Grant and first-team coach Steve Clarke.

But Grant was dismissed by Blues owner Roman Abramovich last weekend in the aftermath of Chelsea's Champions League final defeat against Manchester United and now Ten Cate -- whose abrasive style upset several of the players -- has been removed to make way for the new manager's back-room staff.

Chelsea, who confirmed Ten Cate's exit in a statement on their website, have been linked with Roberto Mancini, Carlo Ancelotti, Mark Hughes, Guus Hiddink and Luiz Felipe Scolari as they search for Grant's successor.

They also made desperate efforts to persuade Jurgen Klinsmann to renege on his contract with Bayern Munich earlier in the week but were rebuffed immediately by the former German national coach.

"Chelsea Football Club can confirm that it has terminated Henk Ten Cate's contract. This follows a meeting on Thursday morning," the statement read.

"As a result of the team management changes at Chelsea FC and in light of any forthcoming appointment it was clear this was the correct decision for all parties."

"Everybody at Chelsea would like to thank Henk for his contribution since coming to the club last year."



Italy striker Luca Toni kicks the ball during a training session at the Artemio Franchi Stadium in Florence on Thursday.