

Zidane is best ever: Beckham

AFP, Madrid

Former England captain David Beckham claimed on Sunday that his ex-Real Madrid team-mate Zinedine Zidane was the best player of all time.

The 33-year-old Englishman told sports daily Marca that it had been a dream come true to play alongside Zidane for three years at Real.

"To train with Zidane for three years (2003-06) was a dream," confessed Beckham, who has been capped over 100 times by his country.

"For me he is the greatest player of all time."

Beckham, who is now playing for Los Angeles Galaxy, also believed that the best Spanish player at the moment is Barcelona's playmaker Xavi, who inspired Spain to the Euro 2008 title last month and was judged player of the tournament.

However, Beckham also thinks that goalkeeper Iker Casillas, who he knows from his time at Real, should be awarded world player of the year after several outstanding performances at Euro.

Beckham also denied he wished to become an actor even though he is living in Hollywood but that he would like to return to Madrid - where he still has a house - one day and work with the youth side at Real.

MU interested in Berbatov

REUTERS, Sofia

Manchester United are interested in signing Tottenham Hotspur striker Dimitar Berbatov, the Bulgaria captain's agent said on Saturday.

British media earlier reported that the European and Premier League champions had made a 20 million pounds (\$39.53 million) bid for the gifted marksman, saying United were prepared to offer Berbatov 80,000 pounds a week to move to Old Trafford.

"I know for certain Manchester United have shown interest in signing Dimitar Berbatov," agent Emil Danchev told Bulgaria's Darik radio. "But I'm not entitled to make any more comments."

Last year, United also made enquiries about the possibility of signing Berbatov but he stayed with the north London club.

The striker turned down an offer from United when he joined Spurs from Bayer Leverkusen for 16 million euros in 2006.

The 27-year-old has been linked with some of Europe's other top clubs following excellent performances in his first two seasons in England. He was instrumental in helping Tottenham win the League Cup last season - their first trophy since 1999.

Pele ridicules slave remark

AFP, London

Football legends Pele and Gordon Banks both warned Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo against walking out on Champions League winners Manchester United and moving to Spanish giants Real Madrid on Saturday.

The 23-year-old forward has still four years remaining on his contract with United - with whom he also won the Premiership last season - and both Pele and Banks ridiculed both his and FIFA president Sepp Blatter's claims that he was being treated like a "slave".

"You are a slave if you work without a contract or you don't get paid," said 67-year-old Pele, who was in Stoke, central England, to unveil a statue dedicated to Banks and for a charity match for the former England goalkeeper's charity foundation.

"If you have a contract then in any job you have to finish the contract."

"I think that when he finishes his contract, then he should be free to go wherever he wants to go."

Ronaldo, who bowed out of Euro 2008 in the quarter-finals after a 3-2 defeat by Germany, is currently recovering from ankle surgery which will rule him out of the start of next season.

Banks, whose save from Pele in the group stage of the 1970 World Cup finals is generally believed to be the greatest ever, accused Ronaldo of showing a lack of respect to Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Banks, who was part of England's 1966 World Cup winning side, said he could not understand why Ronaldo, who scored 42 goals for United last season, would want to move away from Old Trafford to Real Madrid.

"I can't understand why he said he felt he was being treated like a slave," said the 70-year-old, who lost an eye in a car crash in 1972.

"If he has just signed a new contract then he should respect his manager and honour it. It's stupid."

"I don't understand what the problem is. He plays for a team that has just won the European Cup and the Premier League. He plays for his country. What more does he want?"

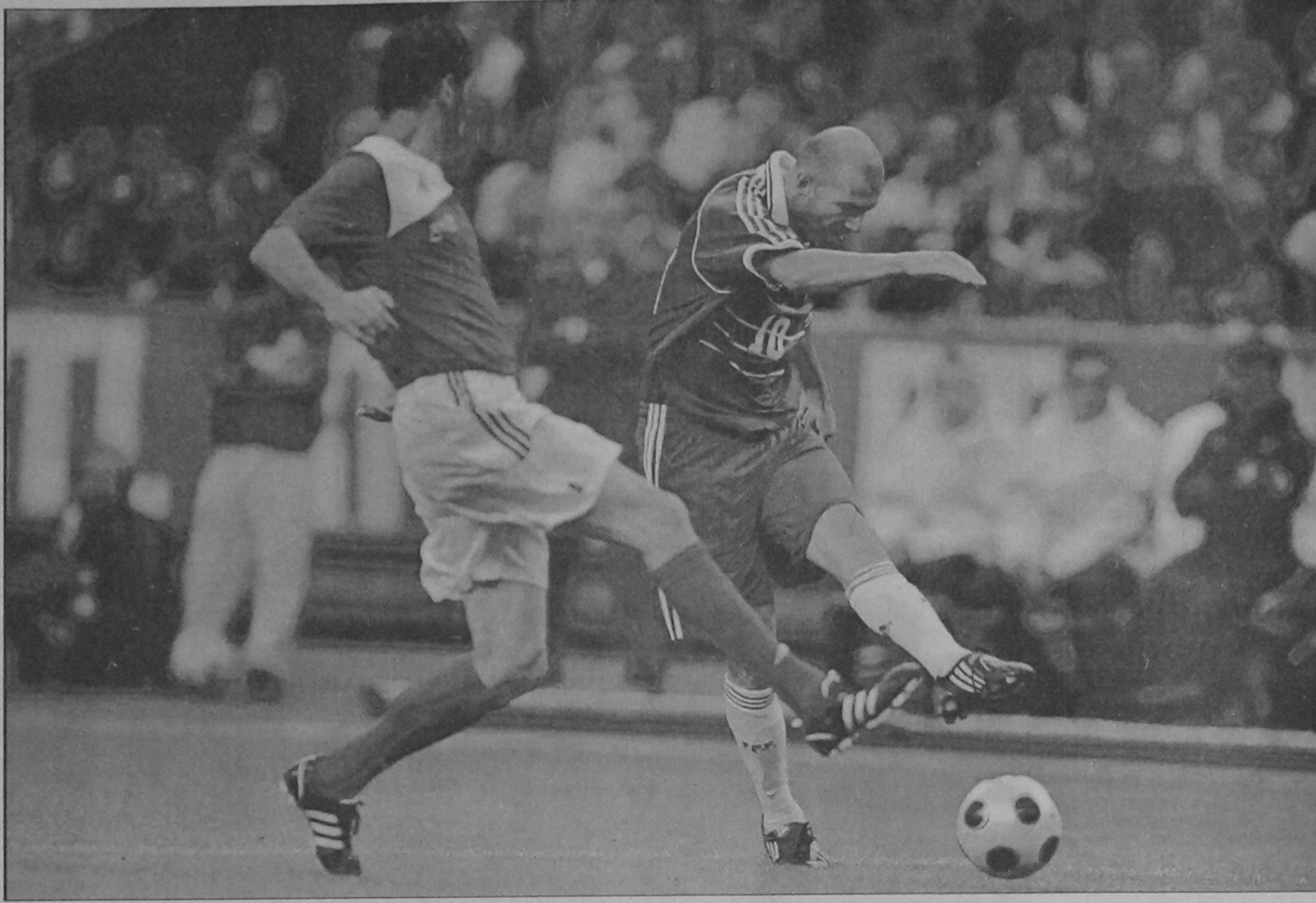


PHOTO: AFP

French legend Zinedine Zidane (R) shoots past Spanish Fernando Hierro during the exhibition match between France's 1998 World Cup champions and a world selection team at the Stade de France in Paris on Saturday.

No rush to replace Queiroz

Football

AFP, Aberdeen

Sir Alex Ferguson said he will take his time to appoint a new assistant after seeing Wayne Rooney inspire Manchester United to a 2-0 friendly win at Aberdeen on Saturday.

Ferguson is without a number two at Old Trafford following Carlos Queiroz's departure on Friday for the post of Portugal national coach.

Queiroz's exit is a big blow for Ferguson, who delegated many tasks to the former Real Madrid coach.

Despite a host of names being linked to the job, such as Laurent Blanc, Brian McClair and former Liverpool assistant Pako Ayestaran, the Scot has vowed to make a con-

sidered appointment.

Ferguson said: "There's nobody in mind and no timescale. We take our time on these things because we've got a good staff. We have never made a quick appointment."

"It's always disappointing to lose good men and Carlos was a good man. He was honest and very loyal to me. He was also a very good coach who brought a lot of initiatives that we have acted upon in recent years."

He added: "I knew when Portugal came in for him that it was going to be difficult for us."

United's trip to Aberdeen - their first outing since winning the Champions League in May - resulted in a comfortable win with goals from Michael Carrick and Rooney.

And Ferguson admitted that his

former club gave United a perfect work-out in their opening pre-season game.

"It was the first game and quite an open one as well. Both teams had a couple of chances and we needed to defend well at times, so it was a good exercise for us."

"The big thing is boosting the fitness and avoiding injuries - that's the key - and we came through on both fronts."

"Wayne had a couple of chances in the first-half and made some nice runs that could have brought us a couple of goals."

"But he made the goal for the first goal when he won the penalty and then he scored the header in the second-half."

He added: "Gary Neville came through ok, but we gave him just one half because it's always difficult when a player has been out for

a year.

"At his age, we didn't want to take any risks and he has come through and that's what is important."

Aberdeen boss Jimmy Calderwood claimed that his players emerged with great credit against Ferguson's experienced outfit.

"United are a fantastic side, there's no denying that. We had a young team out there, but it was a wonderful learning process for them against the quality players that United had out."

"If you look at the older ones, Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes, their attitude, hunger to win, hunger for the ball and their touch was just fantastic."

"I just thought that my lads did really well against that kind of quality."

Asteroid named after Nadal

AFP, Madrid

Spanish tennis superstar Rafael Nadal has been honoured a week after his epic Wimbledon victory over Roger Federer by having an asteroid named after him.

The 22-year-old has had the asteroid - which is 4 kilometres in diameter - discovered in 2003 and previously known as 128036 named in his honour by the Astronomical Observatory of Mallorca, from where Nadal hails.

The astronomers wanted to pay homage to 'one of the greatest tennis players of all time' a spokesman for the Observatory told AFP.

Nadal, winner of the French Open for the past four years, won what was seen as one of the greatest finals at Wimbledon last Sunday ending Federer's five-year reign with an epic 6-4, 6-4, 6-7, 6-7, 9-7 win in the longest final - four hours and 48 minutes - in the history of the tournament.

Nadal's victory also saw him close the gap on the world number one to 545 points in the ATP rankings released last Monday.

The Spaniard could end the Swiss' stay at the top of the rankings, a position he has held for a record number of weeks since February 2004, before the end of the season.

Kaka's choice is C'Ron

AFP, Rome

Brazilian superstar Kaka believes controversial Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo will succeed him as the world's best player.

"Frank is unique in the world," he told La Gazzetta Sportiva. "A midfielder who can score 20 goals in the championship. The fans should know that he is not a spectacular player, but a winner."

Should Lampard make the move to San Siro then Zola believes that he will be playing for one of the best coaches in the modern game in Jose Mourinho.

Whilst the ex-Napoli and Parma striker missed out by a year on playing under the Portuguese, he has heard enough first-hand reports to know that Mourinho can be a success in Italy.

"Mourinho loves messing around, but when it comes to work he is a bulldozer. With Mourinho you only work with the ball, which is loved by players," he said. "With the Beijing Olympic Games fast approaching Zola is hopeful that Italy, whose first match is against Honduras on August 7, can improve on the bronze medal they won in Athens four years ago."

To that end he has big hopes for former Manchester United and Newcastle United striker Giuseppe Rossi, who hit 11 goals to help Villarreal to second place in the Spanish league last season.

"Giuseppe Rossi is a phenomenon and our (Lionel) Messi. He has class, knows where the goal is and makes a difference. Plus he's still young," he said.

Sissoko, who prior to playing for Liverpool played for Valencia under Rafael Benitez where he won the UEFA Cup and league title in his first season, will stay in Italy for the start of Juventus' Champions League campaign, rather than return to his home country for an international friendly on August 20.

However, he is keen to be present for the 2010 World Cup qualifier against Congo on September 7.

"It's only a friendly, I'm not obliged to go and there's the work he is nearly back to 100 percent."

France recall WC triumph

Football

REUTERS, Paris

France, reeling from the shock of an early Euro 2008 exit, celebrated the 10th anniversary of their World Cup triumph with a commemorative game on Saturday between their former heroes and an international selection.

Ten years to the day after France stunned Brazil 3-0 to lift the World Cup for the first time, a packed Stade de France once again saluted the players who had conquered the world.

Zinedine Zidane and guests drew 3-3 with an international team guided by Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger and featuring greats like Zvonimir Boban, Edgar Davids and Gianfranco Zola.

Emilio Butragueno, the oldest player on the pitch at 45, scored the opener for the international side in the first half.

Playmaker Zidane, who scored two first-half headers against Brazil in 1998, equalised in the second half before Pauleta volleyed home to put the visitors 2-1 ahead.

Ludovic Giuly, not part of the winning '98 team, got France level again before late goals from Davor Suker for Wenger's side and Bernard Diomede for the French left the game all square.

"Ten years ago, we were full of hope. Today, we are full of happiness," World Cup-winning coach

Aime Jacquet told a cheering crowd with tears in his eyes before the game.

The France team was complete except for Emmanuel Petit, who scored the third goal in the dying moments of the final.

Fellow midfielder Patrick Vieira, who played for the last 15 minutes against Brazil, and forward Thierry Henry, who stayed on the bench 10 years ago, were also missing.

The game helped French fans forget a disappointing Euro 2008 campaign that saw their team exit the tournament with just one goal and one point from three group matches.

Many of the 1998 side, who are now part of a 'France 98' association, including Christophe Dugarry and Bixente Lizarazu, had called for the dismissal of coach Raymond Domenech after the Euro flop but he has been given the go-ahead to continue.

They wanted former captain Didier Deschamps appointed as coach but the midfielder told Canal Plus before the game: "Many things have been said about us but we do not have any power".

The players were saddened by the death of a young boy who was due to play in a curtain-raiser tournament between children born in 1998. He was killed in the morning when his bus collided with a car while travelling from southern France to Paris.

Muted response to Ronnie arrival

Football

AFP, Rome

There has been a muted response to the impending transfer of Ronaldinho to AC Milan by a number of the club's past players, according to La Gazzetta Sportiva.

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani is expected to meet Barcelona officials and the Brazilian's agent and brother, Roberto De Assis, in the Catalan capital in the next 48 hours to finalise the move and pay a deposit of 10 million euros.

Despite the 28-year-old's pedigree as a two-time world player of the year though, there is a feeling amongst former stars of the Italian club that perhaps he isn't the type of player they need.

Pierino Prati, who helped Milan win the 1969 European Cup, believes that the club still requires a target-man.

Zola backs Lamps

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy under-21 coach Gianfranco Zola has said that Frank Lampard would be an excellent signing for league champions Inter Milan.

The pair played together for two years at Chelsea and having seen his quality at close quarters, Zola knows exactly what type of player the San Siro side will be buying.

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Sissoko close to return

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus midfielder Mohamed Sissoko said on Sunday that he hasn't long left to go before returning from injury and should be available for the Champions League preliminary matches.

The 23-year-old Mali international injured his right thigh on June 1 playing for the national team against Congo.

The former Liverpool player - who moved to Juventus in January for a fee of 11 million euros - told La Gazzetta Sportiva that following a summer break filled with recovery work he is nearly back to 100 percent.

"I should start playing again soon, but the doctors have told me I have to take it one step at a time. "I don't think there will be problems. I'll say again, I'm fine, but if it's possible, I'll speed up my recovery," he said.

'Chelsea have gambled'

Football

INTERNET, undated

Luiz Felipe Scolari admits Chelsea "gambled" by appointing him, but insists he will bring world-class football to Stamford Bridge.

The Brazilian coach was named as Avram Grant's successor mid-way through Portugal's Euro 2008 campaign and despite a glowing CV, which includes victory at the 2002 World Cup with his native country, there were some concerns about his lack of experience in top-level European club football.

Scolari agrees that there was an element of risk in his appointment but has backed himself to deliver the results - and the style - owner Roman Abramovich wants.

"Chelsea gambled on my ability but I believe in myself," he said. "I had two meetings with the owner Roman Abramovich (before getting the job). He said to me 'I

want Chelsea to play well, beautiful and win'. I said 'yes, I agree with you'."

"I am not afraid of my job. All over the world coaches need to win competitions, not just in Chelsea."

Jose Mourinho brought home



LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI

back-to-back Premier League titles during his stint with the Blues but failed to capture the Champions League, while Grant got to the final of the competition before losing to Manchester United on penalties.

But Scolari denies his focus will be on European success, instead choosing to cast his net wider.

The 59-year-old continued: "My pressure is the desire to become world-class, not just to win the Champions League."

"If I say to my players that the Champions League is more important than another competition, I think the players might only prepare for the Champions League. I don't think that's the correct way to look at it."

"I need to prepare my players for the Carling Cup, the FA Cup, for the Champions League, for the Premier League."

"If I say to my players all competitions are important for Chelsea, then I think that is the way."

Scolari also sought to clarify his position with Abramovich, insisting he has full control of all on-field decisions.

"I also told him that when it comes to the pitch it is all mine, no one interferes. He was happy with that."

Rooney inspires United

Football

AFP, Aberdeen

Wayne Rooney kicked off Manchester United's Premier League preparations by inspiring the newly crowned European champions to a 2-0 victory against Aberdeen at Pittodrie on Saturday.

Rooney won a first-half penalty, then netted a second-half header as United cruised to the win in their first game since winning the Champions League two months ago.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, back at Aberdeen to mark the 25th anniversary of the club's 1983 European Cup-Winners' Cup triumph against Real Madrid, named nine internationals in the starting line-up against his former club.

While the injured Cristiano Ronaldo was in Portugal recovering from a recent ankle injury, Rooney, Michael Carrick, Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes all found themselves on duty at Pittodrie.

England striker Rooney could have claimed a hat-trick inside the opening ten minutes but for some wayward finishing.

On three occasions, Rooney found himself with only goalkeeper Jamie Langfield to beat, but the Aberdeen man denied him each time.

But Langfield was at fault on the stroke of half-time when his rash challenge on Rooney led to referee Calum Murray awarding a penalty.

It was harsh on the Scottish Premier League team, who had caused United problems in the early stages, but Carrick - a penalty shoot-out scorer against Chelsea in the Champions

League final two months ago - calmly sent Langfield the wrong way to give United the lead.

United's class began to come to the fore in the second-half and youngster Chris Eagles should have scored shortly after the interval with a far post volley that was wastefully directed over the crossbar.

But another United goal appeared inevitable and, after substitute keeper Bertrand Bossu had brilliantly kept out a Giggs header, Rooney was finally rewarded for his efforts on 68 minutes.

With Ronaldo set to be sidelined for up to three months, Rooney's goals could be crucial and he made up for his earlier misses with a crisp header from Darren Fletcher's cross that was too accurate for the helpless Bossu.

Robinho wants to stay at Real

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian international striker Robinho said on Sunday he didn't want to be sold so Real Madrid could afford to bring Cristiano Ronaldo to Spanish champions Real Madrid from English Premiership titleholders Manchester United.

The 24-year-old told sports daily AS that he wanted to stay at Real where he has been for the past three years and not be offloaded to United's Premiership rivals Chelsea for a reported 40 million euros as Real attempt to finance the 85 million they wish to pay for Ronaldo.

"I hope to stay at Real this year," said Robinho, who cost Real 24 million euros when they secured him from Santos.

"I don't want to be part of the Ronaldo deal."

Robinho, capped over 50 times by Brazil, has been selected for the Brazilian Olympic squad which Real have reluctantly accepted he can play in.