

Lukewarm adios

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spain bid a half-hearted farewell to Ronaldinho following news of his transfer from Barcelona to AC Milan, with the press noting that despite his talents he had become "tired of winning."

"Adios Ronaldinho," headlined the newspaper El Periodico.

The Brazilian superstar agreed late on Tuesday to leave Barcelona, where he was deemed surplus to requirements, and sign for AC Milan in a deal reported to be worth 30 million dollars.

The news of the deal was a bodyblow to English Premier League side Manchester City who had offered 32 million euros for the two-time world player of the year.

Ronaldinho scored 70 goals in 145 appearances for Barca, helping them win the Spanish championship in 2005 and 2006 as well as the 2006 Champions League.

The club also made handsome profits on the sale of team shirts carrying his name, the newspapers La Vanguardia and El Periodico noted.

But in the past two years,

Ronaldinho has been better known for his nocturnal exploits than his performances on the field.

He was not wanted at the Nou Camp by new coach Pep Guardiola following a dip in form last season.

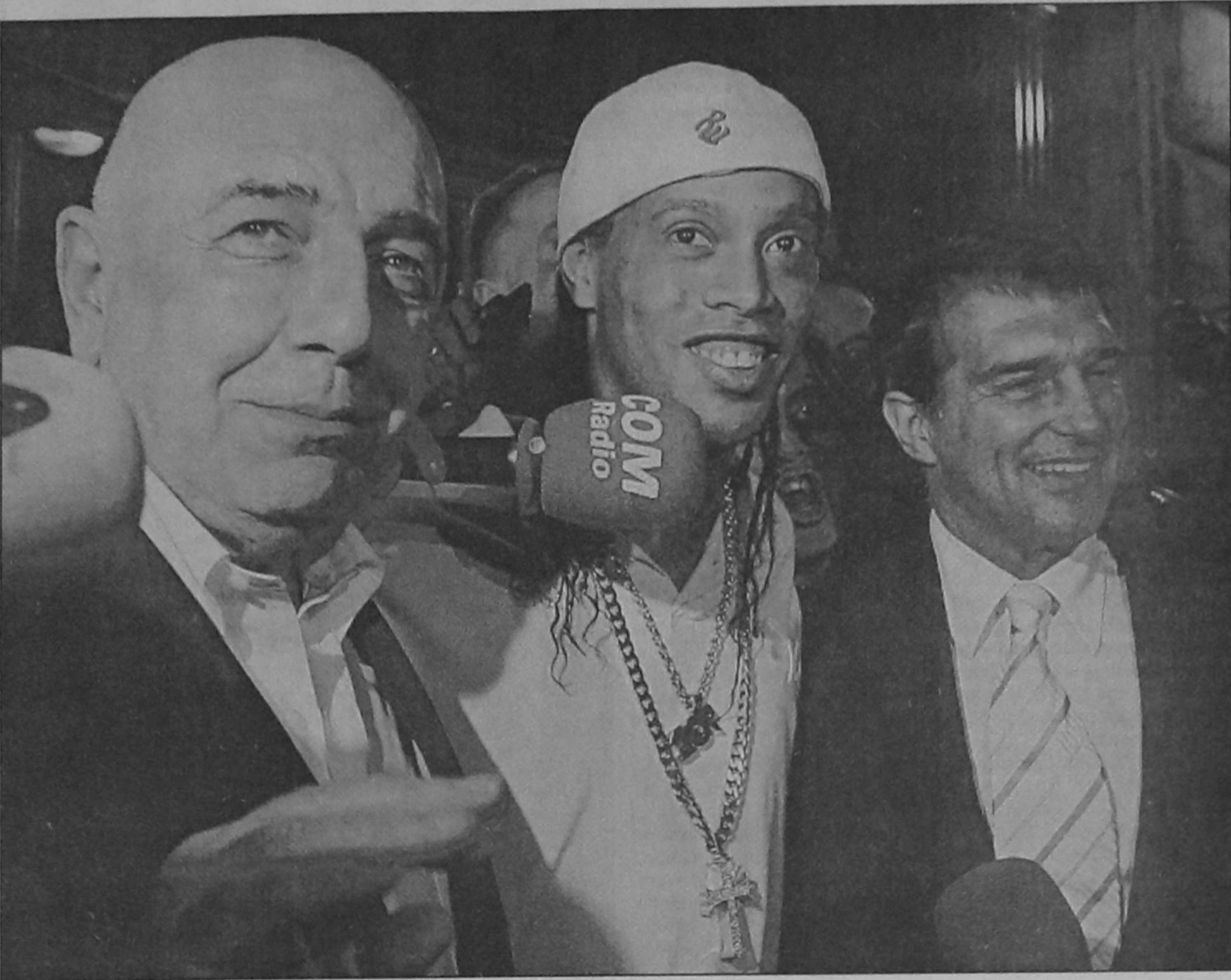
He had become "tired of winning," despite his annual salary of 7.0 million euros, said the sports newspaper AS.

He had "wonderful glory days" at Barca, but he is "the antithesis of the new plan" which Guardiola hopes will finally bring the Catalan club some success after two seasons without silverware, the newspaper El Periodico said.

Guardiola cracked the whip at the first training session on Tuesday, in a contrast to the more relaxed style of his sacked predecessor Frank Rijkaard.

But the press also raised the question of another star at the club, Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o, whom Guardiola wants to sell but who has yet to find a buyer.

The newspaper La Vanguardia said Barca could decide to keep the striker, who is under contract until 2010, especially since it appears unlikely the club will tempt over Arsenal's Emmanuel Adebayor.



Brazilian star Ronaldinho (C) is flanked by AC Milan sports director Adriano Galliani (L) and Barcelona president Joan Laporta in Barcelona on Tuesday. Ronaldinho signed for AC Milan in a deal reported to be worth 30 million dollars.

Milan capture Ronaldinho

Football

AFP, Rome

Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho agreed on Tuesday to leave Barcelona, where he was deemed surplus to requirements, and sign for AC Milan in a deal reported to be worth 30 million dollars.

"AC Milan and FC Barcelona have reached an agreement for the transfer of Ronaldinho," said a Milan statement released on the club's official website.

"Tomorrow (Wednesday) the player will be in Milan for a medical and to sign the contract which will tie him to Milan until June 30, 2011."

Barcelona and Milan officials held talks in the Catalan capital on Tuesday to thrash out the details of the 28-year-old's move.

The Gazzetta dello Sport reported that Milan will pay Barcelona 18.5 million euros (29.5 million dollars) for the World Cup winner with the figure likely to be increased by performance-related bonuses.

The news of the deal was a bodyblow to English Premier League side Manchester City who had offered 32 million euros for the two-time world player of the year.

Ronaldinho, who was not wanted at the Nou Camp by new Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola following a dip in form last season, scored 70 goals in 145 appearances

for the Spanish side.

Meanwhile, Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti is looking forward to having Ronaldinho in his team as the San Siro giants aim to bounce back from their disappointing 2007/2008 season which saw them finish in fifth place in Serie A and miss out on Champions League qualification.

"The important thing is to have quality players and Ronaldinho is without doubt one of those," Ancelotti told Gazzetta dello Sport earlier Tuesday.

He added that the team will line-up so as to make best use of the Brazilian and his international teammate Kaka, with the pair playing behind either veteran Italy international striker Filippo Inzaghi or teenage Brazilian sensation Alexander Pato.

"We will play with a 4-3-2-1 formation. It's a model that has worked well for us and brought us great satisfaction. It's our trademark and it will be again this year, with or without Ronaldinho. Our only objective is to win playing good football. This is Milan," he headed.

Having won two Champions League titles, 49-year-old Ancelotti said that returning to the pinnacle of the European club game was the team's priority.

"We start the season wanting to improve; being out of the Champions League is hard to take, therefore we will do everything to return there as soon as possible."

Hoping for a renaissance

Football

AFP, Rome

When Barcelona beat Manchester United in the 28-million-euro race to sign Ronaldinho from Paris Saint Germain in 2003, they received an instant return on their investment.

The Brazilian scored on his debut against Milan, the team he has now joined for 10 million euros less, in a pre-season match.

His signing was seen as a statement of intent by the Catalan club which featured a new-look team coached by former Dutch international Frank Rijkaard.

Barcelona finished second in Ronaldinho's first season in La Liga behind Valencia, but a year later, with the Brazilian World Cup winner in scintillating form, and helped by Deco, Samuel Eto'o and Ludovic Giuly, the team won the league title for the first time since 1999.

Ronaldinho maintained his form into the next campaign and spurred on by Lionel Messi's arrival, the pair helped Barcelona retain the Spanish title.

For good measure, he also won the World Player of the Year in 2004 and 2005.

The Spaniards also became European champions for the first time since 1992, the second time in the club's history.

Whilst Ronaldinho was subdued in the 2-1 final win over Arsenal, he had proved his worth in the earlier rounds, scoring twice in the quarterfinal victory against Chelsea and setting up Giuly for the only goal of the semifinal against Milan.

Since then, however, the Porto Alegre native has failed to perform with consistency.

He was a disappointment at the 2006 World Cup, part of a Brazil team that blew hot and cold before being eliminated by France in the quarterfinals.

At club level, the 28-year-old has failed to shine, arguing continually with Rijkaard, to the extent that when the Dutchman announced that Ronaldinho was injured in March 2008, many thought it was his way of getting the Brazilian out of the way before he could sell him in the summer.

When Josep Guardiola replaced Rijkaard towards the end of last season, there was speculation that Ronaldinho may be rehabilitated at the Nou Camp.

But the ex-club captain

promptly announced that the Brazilian was up for sale along with Eto'o and Deco.

There will be many who will be wondering how Ronaldinho will gel with Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti.

PSG coach Luis Fernandez and Rijkaard both accused the Brazilian of spending too much time in nightclubs rather than on the training pitch.

At international level he has yet to recover from his anti-climatic performance at Germany 2006 and has seen new Milan teammate Kaka usurp his position as international star.

He has also had questions raised about his fitness with a number of unflattering photos published in recent years.

However, the move to Italy gives him the chance to reignite his career and at 28 he will be confident of at least another five years at the top.

At the San Siro he should not have too many problems settling in as, along with Kaka, there are fellow Brazilians Dida, Emerson and Ronaldo, whilst hopes exist that he will be similarly inspired by 18-year-old Alexander Pato as he was by Messi at Barcelona.

Mourinho nabs Mancini

REUTERS, Milan

AS Roma's Brazilian winger Mancini has become Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho's first major signing, the two clubs said on Tuesday.

Roma, who finished second to Inter in Serie A last season, announced an initial agreement last week and the deal has now been finalised after the player returned to Italy from holiday.

The skilful and versatile Mancini has moved for 13 million euros (\$20.7 million), Roma said in a statement. They added that a friendly between the teams for the season after next was part of the deal.

"I thank Roma for everything they have done for me, for how they have treated me and for the way in which they have behaved in the negotiations with Inter," Mancini told a news conference.

The 27-year-old, who spent five years at Roma and had an uneasy relationship with coach Luciano Spalletti, is the second top player in two seasons to switch between the rivals.

Romania centre back Cristian Chivu left Roma for Inter at the start of last season in an acrimonious move.

Inter were tracking Mancini even before Mourinho's arrival and his signing now makes it less likely they will bid for Porto's Ricardo Quaresma. Their interest in Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard remains, however.

Luis Figo, a rival to Mancini on the left flank, is still expected to sign a new one-year deal with Inter rather than retire.

Mancini is no relation to former Inter coach Roberto Mancini, who was sacked at the end of last term despite Inter retaining the league title.

Spain appoint del Bosque

Football

AFP, Madrid

Former Real Madrid boss Vicente del Bosque was on Tuesday named as the new coach of the Spanish national team to replace Luis Aragones who masterminded the successful Euro 2008 campaign last month.

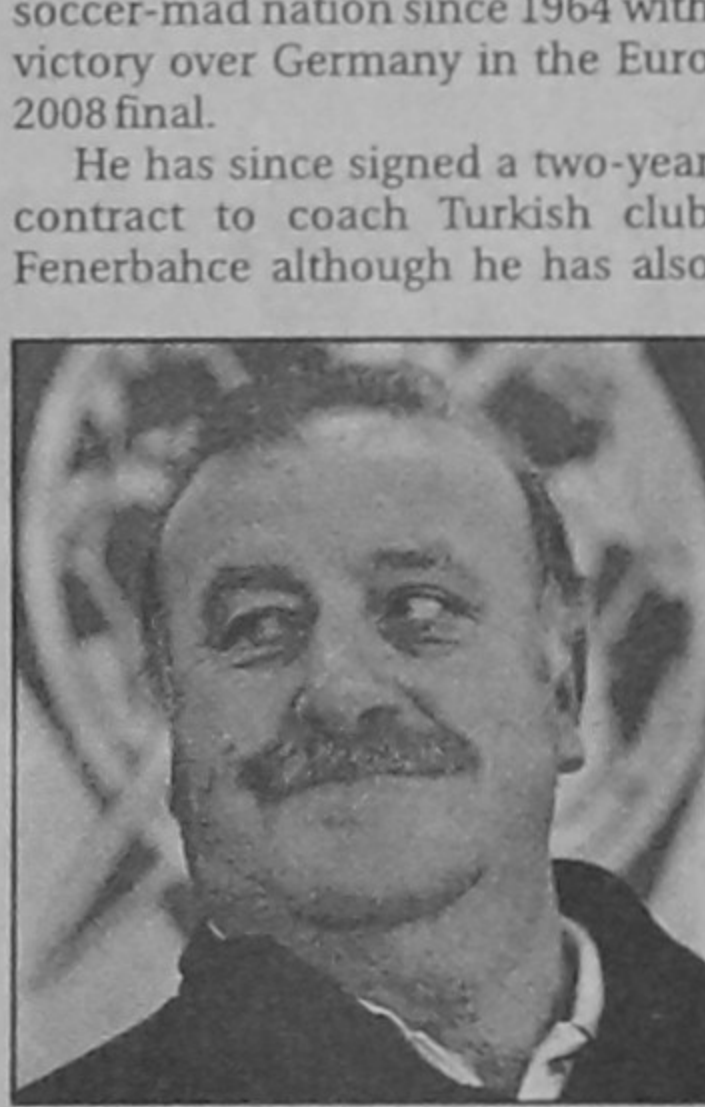
"The president of the Spanish football federation (RFEF) Angel Maria Villar proposed the nomination of Del Bosque to the executive committee which was accepted," said a RFEF spokesman.

"He will be presented on Thursday at 1315 (1115 GMT)."

The 57-year-old Del Bosque will take charge of his first match on August 20 when Spain face Austria in a friendly international in Copenhagen.

His first competitive game will be a 2010 World Cup qualifier against Bosnia in Murcia on September 6.

The 69-year-old Aragones was not offered a new deal with Spain despite delivering a first title for the



VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

been linked with the vacancy at Valencia.

Del Bosque coached Real Madrid to two Spanish titles as well as a Champions League double before enjoying more modest spells at Besiktas in Turkey from

2004-2005 and as sporting director with Spanish second division side Cadiz last season.

He played as a midfielder with Real from 1973-1984, winning five championships (1975, 1976, 1978, 1979 and 1980) and four Spanish Cups (1974, 1975, 1980 and 1982).

Del Bosque then started his coaching career with the Real Madrid B team in 1987.

After two short spells in charge of the first team in 1993-1994 and 1995-1996, he took charge on a full-time basis in 1999.

Despite his two league titles (2001 and 2003) and two European crowns (2000 and 2002), his contract was not renewed by controversial president Florentino Perez who believed a Real coach should match the charisma of the so-called "galacticos" of Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and David Beckham.

In April 2005, Del Bosque insisted he would never be tempted to return to Real declaring himself a "man of principle".

"The way the club announced my departure to the press was very hurtful," he added.

Toni slams critics

AFP, Rome

Italy striker Luca Toni on Wednesday hit back at criticism over his performances for Italy at Euro 2008.

The Bayern Munich striker was expected to be amongst the leading scorers having been top scorer in Germany's Bundesliga with 24 goals, as well as hitting 15 goals for Italy.

However, Toni suffered a nightmare tournament, notably against France where he missed a number of good opportunities to score.

But he refuses to take the blame for Italy's Euro 2008 quarterfinal exit.

"In Italy I received a lot of criticism after the European Championships, because obviously people expected goals and I didn't score any," he told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"I thought I played well, but clearly it is easier to criticise me, someone who plays abroad, than someone who plays in Italy."

Bayern return to the Champions League after reaching last season's UEFA Cup semifinals, but the ex-Fiorentina and Palermo hit man realises that the squad will need to be expanded if they are to be successful.

"If the club wants to compete in the Champions League and win the championship, it has to invest to have a squad larger than 15 or 16 strong players."

"The team needs to strengthen all areas, because realistically, on paper there are stronger teams than us in the Champions League."

Drogba to decide soon

Football

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba will decide on his future within the next 10 days, according to his agent Thierno Seydi.

Drogba has been linked with a move away from Stamford Bridge since launching a scathing attack on the club over the way they parted company with former coach Jose Mourinho early last season and vowing to leave.

The Ivory Coast international also did himself no favours as he was sent off in the Champions League final defeat to Manchester United at the end of the campaign.

Barcelona, AC Milan and Inter Milan are all reportedly interested in Drogba, but his agent now claims he could decide to remain at the Blues.

"Didier has given himself 10 days," Seydi told France Football. "If nothing happens he'll stay at Chelsea and extend his contract by two years."

"He doesn't see himself starting training in a few days with Chelsea and then leaving to a new club."

"The reality of November is not that of today. At the time Didier was affected by departure of Jose Mourinho who he was very close to."

"Today, there is nothing to say that he won't stay at Chelsea."

Drogba has seemed destined for the Stamford Bridge exit door for months but recently looked to be reconsidering his options.

New Chelsea boss Luiz Felipe Scolari claimed at his official unveiling that Drogba was still "200% in his plans", and the Blues have reportedly offered the 30-year-old a big-money deal to remain at the club.

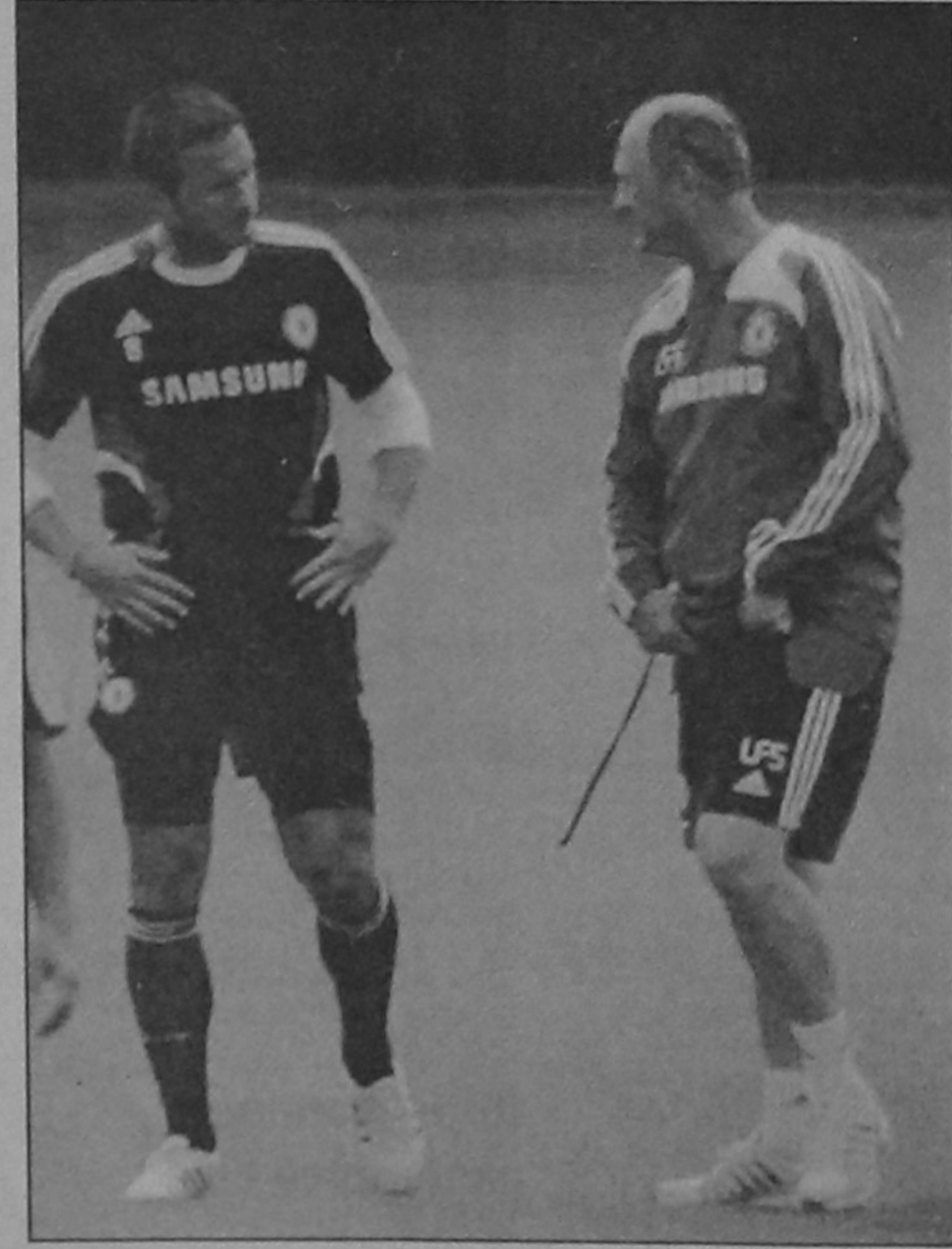
Meanwhile, Drogba is also

aware of the Marseille fans' audacious bid to bring him back to the club he left four years ago. The supporters have launched an appeal to raise the £22million they feel is needed to buy the forward.

According to his agent, Drogba has praised the fans for their initiative but is upset they have had to resort to such a scheme.

"OM would have difficulty paying the player's transfer and salary," added Seydi. "The 'Drogbathon' really touched him."

"He found the initiative nice but pitiful, because that shows a bit that OM and French clubs have real difficulties in attracting great players."



Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (L) is seen during a training session in Cobham on Wednesday.

Hleb ready for Barca

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona said Belarussian midfielder Alexander Hleb is expected at the club for a medical Wednesday prior to his transfer from Arsenal.

"If he passes the medical tests, Alexander Hleb could sign a contract tomorrow (Thursday) and be presented as our new player," the club said on its website.

The Belarussian, who joined Arsenal from VfB Stuttgart in 2005, scored only 10 goals in his three seasons at the London side.

Hleb, who had also been linked with a move to Italian champions Inter Milan, said during an interview in Russia last week that he had told Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger that he did not like living in London and wanted to leave the club.

If the transfer goes through, the 27-year-old would be Barca's fifth signing for the 2008-2009 season.

The club has already signed Mali's midfielder Seydou Keita from Seville and three defenders: Spaniard Gerard Pique from Manchester United, Uruguayan Martin Caceres from Villarreal and Brazilian Daniel Alves from Seville.

Greece exit for Gilberto

Football

INTERNET, undated

Gilberto Silva is set to become the highest-paid player in Greek football by signing for Panathinaikos today after six years with Arsenal.

The Brazilian is set to arrive in Athens to undergo a medical and put pen to paper on a contract agreed by his representatives last week, according to Greek radio station Sport FM.

He is then expected to be presented to the media on Thursday.

There is set to be a noisy reception for the arrival of the 31-year-old Brazil skipper, who is expected to arrive on a flight from London this evening.

A late attempt by Everton to hijack the move reportedly failed when the player chose the club now coached by former Chelsea assistant coach Henk ten Cate over David Moyes' men due to their participation in the Champions League.

PAO president Nikos Pateras met with Gilberto's representatives last week and is believed to have thrashed out a deal after making an offer of around £1million to Arsenal on Friday.

Barring any last-minute changes, the World Cup winner will sign a deal that will see him earn around £6million over the next three years, making him by far the best-paid player in the country.

Despite being made vice captain of Arsenal in 2006, Gilberto found himself on the fringes of the

first team last season due to the presence of Cesc Fabregas and the emergence of Matthieu Flamini, who has since left the club but has been replaced by France midfielder Samir Nasri.

However, in the 29 appearances he did make last season, Gilberto showed that he still has plenty to offer.

After beginning his career in 1997 with America Mineiro, Gilberto moved to Atletico Mineiro three years later. He earned a starting berth in the Brazil team that won the 2002 World Cup.

His displays in Japan and Korea were rewarded by a move to Arsenal that summer and he went on to win one Premier League title and two FA Cups with Arsene Wenger's men.



Barcelona star Lionel Messi gives the thumb up as he takes part in a training session at the Mini Stadium in Barcelona on Tuesday.

L'pool close in on Keane

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool will make Robbie Keane one of the world's costliest players this week - splashing out £20m to lure him away from Tottenham.

That would take his career transfer value close to £60m, behind the likes of Chelsea's serial transferee Nicolas Anelka (£85m) and Hernan Crespo (£68m).

Republic of Ireland skipper Keane is a life-long Liverpool fan and has made it clear he wants to move to Anfield.

Liverpool would be his sixth club with the latest £20m capping a series of multi-million pound moves.

Coventry paid £6m to Wolves for Keane in 1999 and subsequent deals have seen him go to Inter Milan for £13m, Leeds for £12m and then Tottenham for £7m in August 2002.

Keane has scored 107 goals in 254 games for Spurs and bagged 33 goals in 80 Irish appearances.

Kop boss Rafa Benitez believes Keane will provide his side with much-needed pace up front alongside main striker and Spanish hero Fernando Torres.

Benitez has already offloaded towering front man Peter Crouch to Portsmouth to make way - although the Reds boss also still needs to offload Xabi Alonso to raise funds.

His expected move to Juventus has fallen down although Arsenal are now on alert.

A source close to Alonso said: "If the decision was down to Xabi, he would make the move because Arsenal's style is perfect for him."